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My Death Flags Show No Sign of Ending

vol.4

by Izumi

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Chapter 74

It was underground, out of the reach of the outside world's light. Only some pale, and dim artificial light sources were lighting up the place.

Moreover, those sources' original purpose was not to give off light, they were pods filled with a solution that just happened to give off a glow. The pods were arranged in line at a regular interval, and most of them had — human bodies in them.

There were no common points between the ages and genders of the bodies, if there had to be any common points to mention, it would be that they were all naked and unconscious. And there was one other common feature that one couldn't tell based on their appearance, they were all from the Stellar tribe.

Cutting through the atmosphere of that dark, ominous space were the sounds of weapons clashing and flashing. Each time the weapons turned, the pale lights were reflected on their blades.

The real source of those lights and sounds were a young man and a young lady who were crossing blades with each-other.

The young man, who had slightly purple hair, was holding in his hands a long spear, as long as his own body's height. Even a grown adult would be unlikely to be able to wield the spear like the youth did, freely manipulating it while taking into account the spear's weight and centrifugal force.

The weapon of the young woman facing him was a scimitar that she held in a reverse grip. The sword was already short as it was, let alone when compared to a spear. Moreover, even for a scimitar, the blade was quite short and it had a large curvature. And yet, despite being in such a disadvantageous situation, the young woman, who was holding the scimitar with both of her hands, was actually rivaling against the young man and was making many more attack moves than he did.

However, in contrast to that intense battle, both of them were fighting with expressionless faces devoid of emotions. They had no fear of pain or death, nor did they have any killing intent to show their will to kill each other. They were so indifferent that it almost looked as if they were apathetically carrying out

some simple task.

Observing them as they did so was the owner of this place, Justus Freund. Upon being given a certain signal by Justus who had been looking at the scene for a while, the two young people halted their extremely fierce fight and all their movements, as if they were robots who had received a command to stop their actions.

".....That was so-so. Their fighting ability has room for improvement..."

Justus had rather not continue developing them right now, not wanting to end up reducing the number of bodies he had in hand. Though the output of their strength was insufficient to start up the device, putting more efforts in getting more members of the stellar tribe would waste too much time. But there was someone who was fit to support those two, and Justus believed that if he put that someone in charge of managing them, then there would be no problem.

Having come to that conclusion, Justus decided to apply his decision to the development he was working on. If that person was able to get their abilities up to Justus' expected standards, then it would show that his actions followed Justus' wishes.

The moment Justus was longing for was finally coming. That was what he remained more than ten years in the dark for. He was finally reaching the point where he could realize his dearest wish. Justus spontaneously leaked a laugh out of his mouth.

"Hehehe, just a little bit... Just a little bit more until I can meet you... Just you wait."

Justus looked at an empty space with an ecstatic expression on his face. And his usually calm and almost emotionless voice was now quite differently filled with madness.

And so, the despair brought upon by the total destruction of the world was secretly starting to come to life.



Right now, there was a child in front of Harold. More accurately, it was a very recently born baby.

Of course, it wasn't Harold's child. Sleeping soundly in his crib, was Huey, Harold's younger brother born of a different mother.

Harold got to know of Huey's existence shortly after returning from the celebration of the engagement between Itsuki and Silvie held at the Berlioz family's residence. In one of the letters that Harold's father regularly sent him to persuade him to reconsider the break off of his engagement with Erica, he added one sentence "Your little brother was just born, so come by to see him one of these days."

Upon reading his letter, Harold first admired him for being energetic despite being almost fifty years old, but when he thought about it carefully, he, who was originally supposed to be the Stokes household's heir, had a bad reputation that was spread far and wide and had selfishly broken his engagement, so it was only natural that his father would get another son as an insurance, just in case. Although it was a rare concurrence, it was allowed within the kingdom for nobles to get a concubine, and his wife, Jessica, was already over forty years old. In consideration of her health and the child's, perhaps making an heir with a concubine instead was a reasonable choice.

Putting that aside. Harold believed that, if he were to return home now, his father Hayden would certainly nag him, once again trying to persuade him not to break his engagement. Besides, even if he were to survive until the end of the game's story, Harold didn't know how the Stokes family would do. Though some parts of this world were different from the game, fundamentally, it was still very similar to 『Brave Hearts』's world. Although the LP farming method had made some profits for them, there was no change to Harold's parents' pure-blooded principles and the behavior that came with it, leading them to oppress their population. No matter how Harold thought about it, there was a high probability that their household would be crushed. Therefore, in case he survived until the end of the game's story and yet was still unable to return to his former world, Harold had considered the idea of leaving the household and throwing away the name Harold Stokes. Fortunately, he had obtained strength that would make it easy for him to make a living as an adventurer or a mercenary.

Therefore, he had no interest in doing something as troublesome as

voluntarily going back there, however, as Harold worried about that and looked at his brother, he realized something and froze up on the spot.

If the Stokes household was crushed and Harold left it, what would happen to Huey, who was only a newborn? He would be left in the street, and at worst, he would likely die.

The original Harold had no younger brother. He might have had one, but at least, there was certainly no depiction of such a setting within the game. In other words, there was no denying the possibility that Huey was born due to Harold's actions that differed from the game's story.

And even if it wasn't for that, his brother was his brother no matter who his mother was. That's how Harold felt in the part of his emotions that had no regard for reason.

Done with his worrying, Harold dealt with negotiating with Justus and got permission to return to his home for a few days, and so, Harold went back to the Stokes' mansion after five years of absence. And as expected, he ended up receiving a huge scolding from his father and kept fending off his words for over an hour, until he finally got to meet with Huey.

But, standing on the other side of the crib, there was also a woman, Huey's mother and Hayden's concubine. She looked young and was probably of the same generation as Yuno. It looked like there was a difference of over 20 years between Hayden and her.

She did come to the rescue of Harold who had no idea what to do when Huey got unsettled, but, except for the exchange of greetings she had at the very start, she was silent from beginning to end, and it seemed like she did not intend to launch the conversation herself.

It wasn't clear whether this was because she was nervous, terribly reserved, or simply because she did not like Harold.

So Harold tried to come in contact with her to test the grounds.

"You're called Dorothy, right?"

"Yes."

"How old are you??"

"I'll soon be 25 years old."

She was much older than Harold. So it would have been only natural if she looked down on him a little, and yet it seemed like Dorothy had chosen to use honorifics with him and to talk politely. Harold could not figure out whether that was normal or not.

In the first place, he was troubled enough not knowing in the slightest what kind of stance he should take while interacting with her. From Harold's point of view, her stand as his father's lover was fine enough already, but she was married in the family register so she could also be said to be his mother-in-law. However, his father's wife Jessica was also live and well so perhaps it was more accurate to say Dorothy was just his second woman? If that was really what she was considered to be, then Harold was not familiar with what that position represented in the hierarchy and was confused as to how to communicate with her. Harold's mindset was still largely similar to the one from modern-day Japan.

"You chose to give the favor of being a noble's concubine at that age, huh. Did your family throw you away?"

Contrarily to his mind that was hesitating to talk, his mouth was completely straightforward. And Dorothy also answered without a problem.

"I wasn't married and it was too late for me to get married, so I am alright with it."

According to Dorothy's words, it seemed like she was a former young noble miss from somewhere, but her family had a falling business and had to sell their title of nobility so as not to become poor to the point of not being able to live. Though around ten years had passed since they had reluctantly passed from being aristocrats to being simple commoners, they still were not able to stop their downfall towards extreme poverty.

And at that time, a proposal was made towards Dorothy. Dorothy's father had jumped on this occasion. Apparently, the effect of that proposal made it so that the Stokes family took care of Dorothy's family's financial difficulties, therefore allowing them to regain their noble title, which they had sold off.

It was in gratitude for that favor that Dorothy became Hayden's concubine. She was basically sacrificed.

Because Hayden had used such vicious methods to have his way with her

against her will, she probably did not have good thoughts about him, or even about Harold, who was the reason why Hayden took her to the household. Even when it came to Harold's engagement with Erica, Hayden had never resorted to any methods that went as far as that proposal.

Well, given the high importance Hayden attached to noble blood and given how Dorothy was a "former noble", that proposal was likely the result of his maximum and ultimate concession.

In any case, Harold's heart was full of apologies for Huey and Dorothy.

"Humph, look, your thoughts are of no interest to me. As long as you don't annoy me, do as you like."

Though he wanted to transmit those feelings of his ever so slightly, it was an impossible wish for him to put them into words properly. However, Harold was concerned about the future education of Huey, who was going to be raised in such a household, and especially about his future views regarding the commoners. As he worried about that, Harold looked at his younger brother's sleeping face from the side, and finally left the room.

Although Harold had yielded to temptation and had come to meet Huey, it could not be said to be a good encounter for the emotional side of Harold. Watching people who were thrown around at the convenience of their families and surroundings was obviously depressing for him, especially since he was part of the cause behind that.

And if the household were to fall to ruin, Dorothy, who was married to the Stokes family, would also go through hardships once again. Due to Harold's actions, it was almost decided that the destiny of Huey and Dorothy was to be unhappy.

But that was only as long as Harold stayed true to his plans to desert the Stokes' household.

(What should I do?)

The downfall of the Stokes' household was not necessary for Harold. He was just thinking that it would be fine since it was supposed to happen anyway if the flow of the game's story was thoroughly followed. That was why Harold was considering leaving the household and did not feel the need to make a move or do anything about its ruin.

It could be said that he could not afford to worry too much about the household as he had rather focus completely on protecting himself.

However, because of Harold repeatedly acting against the world's original story, a change had occurred in the situation.

There was no particular meaning to helping Dorothy and Huey. If he just discarded the issue as being someone else's problem, that would be the end of the matter.

Though he understood that in his mind, Harold could not bring himself to be ruthless enough to abandon those with an unhappy future for the sake of his own future. He could not choose that method even though it would make things much easier for him. In a word, he was soft.

That day eight years ago, Harold had reprimanded Erica, telling her her kindness made her too soft, but he did not have the qualifications to say that.

But that didn't mean obstructing the collapse of the Stokes family would necessarily have a bad effect on Harold's death flags. Perhaps that was an irresponsible thing to say, but it was the goal he had determined for himself and that he would do his best to accomplish.

But he still couldn't do the impossible. It would be good if as a result of his efforts he could help Dorothy and Huey avoid the unhappiness that was going to visit them. If he found himself unable to do that, then at that time, he'd think of what to do next.

Besides, Harold also had some vague feelings towards his family. Harold wasn't the type of person who was very fond of discrimination, but despite that flaw of theirs, Harold's family had raised him with great care so far, and he was quite thankful to his parents who did not abandon him, even when the people of the world turned their backs on him.

He believed it would be best if the Stokes family could survive.

Though that was going to give Harold some new issues to carry on his shoulders, the more occupied he was, the less time he had to be worried. The next day after arriving at his parents' house, Harold received a summon as a message on the machine attached to his wrist. Naturally, the sender was Justus. Unable to take his leisure time, Harold directly returned back to the research center and unwillingly dragged his feet towards Justus' location.

The time when the game's story would start was very close. Harold wanted Justus to avoid giving him missions that were too time consuming if possible.

While thinking so, Harold entered inside Justus' laboratory without knocking. That was the standard procedure whenever he entered the room, for Justus himself had complained that answering the door every time was troublesome. Harold had put himself on guard, not knowing what to expect. And he was right, for Justus was not the only one who had been waiting for him, as there were also a young man and a young woman, that Harold had never seen, in the room.

The young man with purple hair was probably around 20 years old, and the young woman, who had light blue hair, was probably 17 or 18. Both of them were expressionless, as if they had no emotions.

Without giving Harold the time to ask who they were, Justus skipped over any explanations and solely declared the role that Harold had to play.

"Harold, you'll be the leader of these kids."

"Huh?"

Harold responded by reflex, unable to understand the meaning behind Justus' words. What did he mean by leader? Or rather, who were these two people? If he wasn't under Justus' control, he would have immediately refused, however, that was not an option. Either way, for now, the priority was to clear out any doubts Justus had about him.

"What's with them?"

"They're dolls of my own design."

"Playing with dolls at your age? That's quite a weird hobby."

"There is more to them than just being dolls. They are faithful servants that follow any commands given to them."

".....Did you brainwash them?"

"Well, something like that. The people of the Stellar tribe can use some unique magic, they have special organs that allow them to use astral bodies in a different way than we do. While making them into dolls, I removed the unnecessary parts, such as emotions and the like. But although I'm saying I

removed them, I didn't completely eliminate them, I just made it so that they wouldn't appear on the surface..."

Although Justus was giving a long lecture, Harold's consciousness was gradually straying away.

Dolls that obeyed orders, stellar tribe, removed emotions.

By assembling those key words, a hypothesis assembled itself within Harold's mind. He had a very bad premonition.

Chapter 75

(Harold POV)

『Brave Hearts』was an authentic, Oudou* RPG. The protagonist, Liner, grew up as a close witness to the strength of his parents who were quite skilled thanks to their past as adventurers. From his childhood, Liner kept training himself, yearning to become stronger than his mother and father, and before he knew it, he reached a point where he was dreaming of becoming the leader of the saint knight order.

Anyone would acknowledge the leader of the knight order as a mighty hero and it was no exaggeration to say that most children aspired to become like him.

On his 17th birthday, Liner was supposed to take over a certain sword that his parents had obtained in their adventurer days and head to the royal capital so as to enter the knight order.

However, a certain evening soon before his 17th birthday, some thieves broke into Liner's house and stole the sword. Thus, after shaking himself off his parents' restraint, Liner went out of the village to get the sword back from the thieves, with his childhood friend, Colette, accompanying him.

That was the introduction of the game, and this was the trigger that got Liner involved with an atrocious plan that was going to shake the whole world, therefore making him do all he could to get in said plan's way.

Incidentally, sending the thieves away and fighting them was a part of the game's combat tutorial. At that point, the player could experience a real battle with magic mixed in. It was an event that could not be avoided when playing the game.

Well, in this world, there was an extremely high chance to eventually experience such a battle at later times, but that didn't change the fact that this event was the first major turning point for the story's development. A turning point that would have been impossible if not for those thieves coming to steal the sword,

and Harold was convinced that the whole operation had been carried out by the people under Harrison, the Minister for Defense. Those people had no

name in the game, and even their lines of dialog were poorly prepared. They had no particular background to investigate or anything of the sort either. They were plot devices that merely played the parts they were given. However, that was just in the game's story.

From Harold's analogical reasoning based on his dialog with Justus, the young man and woman were almost surely the ones who were supposed to trespass into Liner's residence and steal his sword. The problem was that Harold was ordered to join them and manage them, and that, in the game, the thieves were actually... a trio.

Having finished listening to Justus' lecture, Harold questioned him so as to clear his own doubts.

"I get what they are. However, why do I have to go with them? It would be fine if you just prepared some other doll, right?"

"I've considered doing that but, to reach this point in the research, I had to expend more of the stellar tribe's members' bodies from my stock than I expected, so I'd rather keep some spares."

Those people of the stellar tribe had been captured by Justus in the middle of the confusion of the battle that he had caused between the knight order, the imperial army and the stellar tribe; and he had just declared that they were "spares". For him, they were not even human beings.

That realization was frightening, but this time's matter was actually also due to Harold intervening in that battle and therefore obstructing Justus' plans. If Justus had been able to capture the stellar tribe members like he did in the original story, this issue would not have occurred, and in the first place, if Harold hadn't intervened in the battle, he would not have fallen to the position of Justus' subordinate.

In short, this was merely the result of the seed Harold had sown himself.

Harold was going to be working on two fronts, both as Harold Stokes and as the ringleader character responsible for the theft.

Although he could somehow deal with the former role by maneuvering himself through it, the latter would make him a complete antagonist. So it would likely be a troublesome matter if his identity were to be discovered on the job. Justus, unconcerned about Harold's dilemma, swimmingly pursued the

conversation.

"And so, from now on, the three of you are going to be under the commands of a man called Harrison. Are you acquainted with him?"

"I'm not. If I'm not mistaken, he's the military's defense minister, right?"

"That's right. It really wasn't easy to make an inflexible and stubborn person like that succeed, but I was finally able to get him to a position where he could be of some use to me."

"You've been keeping your eyes on him for quite a while, huh."

In the game's story, Harrison was a foolish man who was too fixated on his pride, and in the end, he was pathetically killed by a subordinate who was supposed to be under his control.... thinking of that, Harold realized that the role of killing Harrison had fallen onto him.

Harrison treated the automaton dolls just like tools. He forced impossible demands on them and mercilessly slayed them with his sword when they were unable to succeed, and in his final moments, his life was going to be snatched away by one of those dolls that was supposed to not have any emotions. That was the conclusion awaiting him.

"His thoughts are biased and he's too narrow-minded, but nobody's as easy to handle as he is. So at least, he'll make for a fine throw-away pawn."

"Your hobbies are as bad as ever."

"That sarcastic mouth of yours won't do. I've explained to Harrison that the dolls don't have a language feature, so be careful not to talk to him. And while you're at it, cover yourself with a robe so that he can't see your face."

Harold's face and name were pretty well known, so these types of measures were certainly indispensable.

If he were honest, he wasn't all that up for the mission, but he could expect his returns to match the risks. To begin with, having been given an order, Harold had no right to refuse. If he did refuse, he'd probably end up directly on the road to being culled or to becoming some experiment's test subject. Either way, he'd have low chances of survival.

Therefore, it was more constructive for him to put his head to work and figure

out a way to accomplish his duty while doing his best to avoid making things worse. Due to his experiences so far, Harold had reached a point where he had resigned himself to having troublesome matters coming his way out of nowhere.

He told himself that was just how things went with this body and decided it was best to just let it be.

"As for you two, you're forbidden to act without my permission or Harold's."

At Justus' words, the young man and woman moved their heads vertically and nodded. From that, it looked like they were going to follow the command perfectly well, but there was still a part of said command that Harold could not possibly ignore.

"Hold on. I can order them, too?"

"Of course. There will undoubtedly be many situations that will require a judgement to be made on site. They're officially Harrison's henchmen, but if they listened to his orders only with no exception, then there would be no end to it."

Justus certainly had a point, and if Harold was indeed able to get them to move at his own will to some extent, then when a critical situation came, he would have a wider range of actions to help him deal with it. That was pretty reassuring.

"What's the order of priority on the commanding rights?"

"It goes I, you, and then Harrison. But even though it'll be up to you whether to follow Harrison's instructions or not, you should stay as loyal to him as possible."

"That will depend on him."

"Hmm, well, that will be fine."

Though it wasn't clear how Justus came to that conclusion, it seemed like he had given Harold a passing mark.

Actually, so as to follow the flow of the original story, Harold had no intention to face Harrison head-on. So his primary concern was that his bad mouth would stand out in a conversation, but with Justus covering him, he would probably

manage somehow.

That left Harold with the question of whether to kill Harrison or not.

There was no fight against Harrison in the game. His main fight was the one against the black-robed people under his control, whose role was now going to be played by Harold in disguise. Despite it being pretty tiresome, the three-way fight's experience value and reward items were comparatively lacking, but Harold left that aside.

As explained before, in the game's story, Harrison was killed by an automaton doll that was supposed to be under his command. From the scene, it looked like the black robed person, who had been completely obedient before, rebelled when his/her companion was killed, but judging from Justus' earlier exposition, it appeared like that scene was actually a result of him ordering the doll to kill Harrison;

or perhaps the doll's suppressed emotions simply overflowed when its companion was killed.

Either way, Harrison died. But really, his death was completely irrelevant to the game's story. He was just a man who was used by Justus, moreover, he wasn't even aware of it at all, and he ended up bidding his last farewell to the world while attempting to assist some fake plan that Justus told him about. Then, what would happen if he survived? Well, nothing special. Thinking about it normally, if he wasn't killed, based on the proportions of the matters he was guilty of, he would surely be arrested for treason.

There was no doubt that if the offenses committed by Harrison were to come to light, he would be tried in the tribunal, and Justus, who intended to discard him from the get go, would not go out of his way to cover up for him or help him.

If so, then Harrison would definitely be sentenced to death. That was as far as he would get.

He was also involved in the battle five years prior between the knight order, the Sarian Empire and the stellar tribe; and since he participated in guiding the imperial forces, he would not be able to find any excuses for himself. Many people had died because Harrison had tried to satisfy his selfish desires. While he thought that Harrison was a dead man anyway, Harold could not wipe

off his feeling of wanting to avoid killing a person. Though he had almost killed Ritzert in the battle five years prior, he was not in a normal state of mind at the time as he was unable to handle having his Switch turned on.

But with his own hands and out of his own will, he would not even be able to kill in self-defense if he didn't have a good enough reason for it, so could he really straight up "murder" someone? However, Harold realized that thinking of such things at this point in time was pretty unreasonable.

Well, it didn't matter since there would be no harm done even if he didn't kill Harrison personally.

"Then, I'll be handing you over to Harrison this evening. Do your best not to cause any trouble."

Having heard those concluding words, Harold returned to his room. Though he had many more things to think about now, if he had to give a conclusion, it would be that this whole development was not bad.

Justus said that he would be handing Harold over to Harrison, which meant that Harold would be able to get away from Justus' control for quite a while. With the original story starting, this turn of events was exactly what Harold was hoping for, as he wished to be able to move more freely. It was going to be somewhat easier for him to come in contact with Elu.

Even though he was worried about being exposed by Liner and the others, as long as he was careful about that one thing, there would still be great benefits.

While Harold thought of that, the day made way for the evening. Harold and the others, who were dressed in black robes that could slip within the dark of the night, were led to a quiet bar in the back of a popular little alley, far away from the city's center and main streets.

In the bar, which was very dark, not a single light was turned on. One could not even see his own feet clearly inside. Nobody would be enjoying alcohol in such a situation; or rather, to say nothing of clients, there was not even any sign of a shopkeeper.

Yet, why was the door's lock opened? Without giving any explanation about the mysterious, uninhabited store, the man who served as Justus' envoy directly went forward inside. Far in the back of the shop, there was a door. Though Harold thought it was connected to the shop's interior, what appeared

behind it was actually a stairway made of stone that was extended underground.

With that man in the lead, the group of four steadily descended the stairs. What was waiting ahead of them was a room made of the same kind of stones that composed the stairs. The ceiling wasn't very high, there were stone pillars installed here and there, and in terms of space, the room was pretty much as big as a tennis court, if not bigger.

"Oh, I've been waiting for you."

Such a voice echoed within the room that was no less dark than the shop's interior. The owner of that voice was Harrison, who was sitting at a round table. Just like in the game, he had quite the protuberant belly. If Harold opened his mouth, he would probably insult him saying "It's not everyday that you get to see cattle chatting like that. Is this some sort of show?" or something like that. He not having to talk was one really helpful setting.

"Are those the dolls the doctor was talking about?"

"Yes. Please look forward to their flawless work as your servants."

"Sounds promising. What are their names?"

"They don't have any. You're welcome to name them as you like, Harrison-sama."

"Then, I guess I'll just name them "dolls". I heard the doctor call them that."

Harrison and Justus' envoy started conversing before Harold's eyes. Within that conversation, they talked about how Harold and the others did not have names, and the envoy explained that they had lost their language capabilities because their brains were tempered with while still in the development stage, but despite their lack of response, the dolls would obey orders perfectly well. However, the important part was that Harrison was well aware of Justus' existence. If so, then when a critical moment came, even if Harold did not take care of Harrison personally, it was highly likely that Justus would seal his mouth anyway.

Harrison had some splendid death flags going for him. He could be said to be Harold's comrade in a sense.

While thinking of such trivial things for a few minutes, Harold silently observed the scene before his eyes. Before long, the delivery was finished and the envoy went away.

Having confirmed that, Harrison turned towards Harold and the others' direction, and a light yet eerie smile stretched itself on his face.

"Now then, my faithful dolls. Let's have you work immediately for my noble self's salvation."

Translator's note: * An Oudou Rpg is a sort of classical RPG, with the hero going on a journey and the like, like Dragon quest.

Chapter 76

(Harold's POV)

Though Harrison was exaggerating when he used words like “salvation”, the command he gave was, as expected, to collect treasures scattered all over the kingdom. Overall, those treasures, including the Griffith family's treasured sword, were just different kinds of weapons.

Though some of them would temporarily get into Harrison's hands, they would end up belonging to the protagonist's party. Perhaps this made it sound as if they were going to steal them, but it couldn't be helped as they were weapons that were supposed to be obtained in the game.

Incidentally, those treasures' setting was that they were legendary weapons made out of materials scraped off star cores, which were ultra-gigantic solid astral bodies. But those weapons could never be produced again because, as a tradition, the method of processing solid astral bodies had been lost to time; let alone calling them valuable national treasures, it wouldn't be wrong to call them important international cultural properties. So the protagonist's party had to have quite some guts to use those treasures to their hearts' content in battle. But well, even if they were called out on that, it wouldn't achieve much, because if they didn't use those weapons and ended up being defeated in battle, the whole continent would fall. Therefore, when comparing between the fate of the world and the value of those weapons as cultural properties, it was pretty obvious which way the balance would tip.

However, rather than this, it was more important for the game's story to begin at last. Harold had to start making his move. But Harrison's first instruction was to head to Liner's place. Before that, the actions Harold could take were limited.

The day before the start of his task, Harold was in a certain restaurant which had the backing of the Giffelt family and that he used when exchanging information with Elu.

Though the outside of the shop had a decrepit feel to it, the inside was tidy and neat. When Harold said the numbers that he was informed about beforehand

to one of the store's people, he was led to a certain private room.

While thinking that this bar had a similar system to an Izakaya while recalling his previous world, Harold kept waiting for several minutes. Then, the door to the private room opened, and the one Harold was waiting for, Elu, entered.

Elu was now basically staying at Frieri's base. However, he had told Harold that when he wanted to talk to him, he needed to do it at this restaurant, and as one would expect, he properly showed up at the specified time and place. But that made Harold wonder, just how elaborate and concealed was Elu's information network?

"Hey there, sorry to keep you waiting."

"Hurry and sit."

"As usual, getting right to it without a greeting."

Elu took a seat while somewhat exasperated. Before getting to the main topic, there was something Harold had to confirm.

"Is it really safe to talk here?"

"I guarantee it. The people are all clear, and they're being constantly monitored in case anyone suspicious shows up. If there is anything wrong, we'll be notified immediately."

If Elu said that, then it was probably all right. With that thought, Harold started talking about his plans for the next day and the days after.

"Tomorrow, I'll be leaving the royal capital by the orders of a man named Harrison. Do you know him?"

"Of course, he became the kingdom's Minister for Defense recently."

"That's a result of Justus pulling the strings behind him. Though I don't know whether Harrison himself is aware of that, we'll be leaving the royal capital as part of one of Justus' schemes."

"That smells like trouble. What's the goal?"

"It's to go steal a treasured sword in a certain private house."

"That kind of makeshift work doesn't seem like something you'd do, Harold."

"Don't bother with that. We won't show Harrison our faces or talk to him, and we'll be executing his orders while acting as automaton dolls with no language ability."

"In other words, Harrison doesn't know that you're one of those dolls. Also, who's "we" exactly?"

"There are two other people, and they're actual dolls that Justus made by experimenting on the bodies of people from the Stellar tribe. As I said before, they have no language ability, and I think that their emotions have been pretty much completely removed. Therefore, they don't feel fear, and they've become soldiers who just execute the orders they're given without fearing death."

Even though Harold explained that, there was no change in Elu's complexion and facial expression. Something of this level was probably not enough to agitate him.

To Harold, that was proof that he was strong, not half-hearted in his actions and that he wouldn't be one to hide away when a real fight would come. He was a very reliable ally. If Elu were to abandon his post, things would immediately and certainly become very difficult, so much so that Harold would even kneel down to keep him in his camp.

"Is there anything to watch out for regarding those two people?"

"Justus can move them at will with his commands, and though they supposedly should obey my orders as well, his commands have a higher priority. Also, I'm not sure whether the information about them not having a speech function is true. That guy didn't give me any more information than he needed to."

"In short, you'll once again be moving while counter-plotting against Justus."

That was right, but being told about it again made Harold feel down. Even with Harold's knowledge about the game's story, trying to outsmart Justus and the like was similar to walking on a tightrope.

To begin with, right now he was already anxious about whether there was really nothing that was exposed to Justus so far.

"And so, how is this matter related to Frieri?"

Elu approached the core of the matter. As could be understood from his word, Elu was already involved with Frieri's operations. Yet, even now, Harold still didn't know how Elu came in contact with the organization. All Harold knew was that by the time he came back from the celebration in the Berlioz family, Elu already had had his first contact with Frieri. Harold couldn't imagine how Elu had slipped through Justus's surveillance; though there was no doubt he had done it. Based on the time and the place's location, Harold calculated that, to get to Frieri's base in that time frame, Elu had to have gotten going a day or two after the three-way date he had in the royal capital.

However, Harold himself knew that Elu had done no such thing. So Elu had probably used the power of the Giffelt organization. *But still*, Harold thought, *that group is really out of the norm*.

"A red-haired man called Liner, and a blond woman called Colette will probably chase us after the theft."

"That's specific. Are you acquainted with them?"

"....Something like that. So, hereafter, you'll be supporting those two people as Frieri."

"In other words, our work will be restricted to this?"

"Yeah. Also, all I'll tell you is that this is related to that longstanding desire of yours."

".... I see. If that's how it is, I'll completely devote myself to dealing with that matter."

"Do it. However, this time, it's fine to just get acquainted with them. Also, if you're ever asked, you don't know me, and of course, you're not acquainted with me either. Got it, bastard?"

"All this to come in contact with them, seems like you once again have quite a few complicated circumstances going on. May I pry?"

"Don't."

"Roger that."

There were some mysterious points to the story and Elu probably felt doubtful about many parts of it, but in the end, he didn't press the issue. Perhaps he thought that, even if he tried to ask, he wouldn't get an answer anyway. But Harold was grateful for that response, for it wasn't unlikely that he would let something slip by accident.

"But, in that case, we're going to be opposing you, aren't we?"

"It's fine. Even if you support them, they can't be a threat to me."

Of course, that was not true, but originally, Frieri was not directly involved during the fight between Harold and Liner.

Basically, the main helper was Elu, who provided appropriate information when needed. In other words, his guidance was going to become important in making Liner's team move the way they did in the game.

As a matter of fact, there weren't many scenes where Frieri was relied on in the game. Nevertheless, there was a possibility that Harold would end up being checkmated if there was no Frieri unlike the original story, so he had to establish the organization.

However, it had also become a trump card for him, as he had war potential that he could deploy at will when it came to the crunch.

So, even if not for Harold's hypothesis which he based on the game's story, establishing the group still would not have been a waste of time when considering the possibility of an emergency occurring.

Afterwards, having discussed the place where they would meet to come in contact on the appointed day and the actions that they should take, Harold and Elu left and each went their own way.

The next day, Harold left the royal capital together with the doll duo. He first rode on a boat for half a day, and from there, he went on land and spent three more days being shaken around in one public carriage after another. Then, at last, he finally arrived at a town right next to Bloche village, where Liner lived. The first thing he did was to settle down in the town for a night with the pretext of wanting to cure the fatigue he and the dolls accumulated through their long journey, so as to gain some time until Elu and his people joined him there.

Thus, he first went to an inn. Just in case, he took three rooms, one for each.

Though Harold did want to have his private time and space, he was also thinking of the other two.

The two people were simply called dolls, they didn't have a name, and Harold was even told that they didn't have feelings. But still, they were living human beings, if they didn't eat or sleep, they would be exhausted and weakened. Moreover, there was a scene in the game that made it seem as if their feelings, that were supposed to have been lost, had returned to them.

They were humans. Even Justus, who had created them himself, had said that their seemingly lost emotions were only asleep. Though it was nothing more than Harold's wishful thinking, he believed that perhaps if they survived to the very end of the story, there was a chance that they would return back to their original selves.

So Harold did not and could not think of the two of them as dolls or tools.

Perhaps he was also feeling guilty, for they were captured as test subjects during the fight that occurred in the Beltiz forest.

Had he done things better, perhaps these two people would not have gotten dragged into this like that.

Of course, that idea was driven by his feelings, because when considering the situation logically, it was hard to say that any wrong could be attributed to Harold. The ones responsible were Harrison and Justus.

Therefore, Harold's guilt was a misdirected feeling. But even though Harold thought that in his head, emotionally, he couldn't convince himself.

Nonetheless, he wouldn't be able to move about properly if he kept thinking about these things too much, so, for the time being, Harold's stance was to tell himself to regard the two as humans as much as he could.

For that reason, Harold first pushed the two into their rooms and instructed them to take a proper rest and recover from their tiredness. If he did not do that, maybe they would just sit in the room doing nothing until the next day's evening. Though they were obedient to orders, it was quite bothersome that they would not take any actions outside of the instructions they were given. While thinking about it for the next time, he would order them to autonomously take any actions necessary to keep themselves alive; Harold strolled through the town which he was visiting for the first time.

He was dressed in his usual black overcoat, and if there was a difference to point out, it would be that, in place of the two swords he usually had hanging around his waist; there was now only a single simple Katana.

He did that as a prevention measure, for if he used his habitual characteristic weapons, it could expose his identity when the true colors of the black robed people would be discovered in the future.

Incidentally, he had not put on the black robe that was the trademark of the trio. He was afraid that he would be misunderstood as a suspicious person with such an outfit, and a trio of black robed individuals would easily spark people's memories. Since it had been fixed that he would become a thief after the next day's evening, he wanted to reduce as much as possible; the chances of his steps being tracked by people other than Liner.

Nevertheless, walking around with his head exposed made him a little anxious about being noticed due to his extremely bad reputation. But that appeared to be a needless fear given that this was just a rural town, and there didn't seem to be any fingers being pointed at him. The further away one went from the royal capital, the less Harold's reputation was known.

Thanks to that, Harold was able to go out on a walk. But there was nothing entertaining about his stroll, he wasn't sightseeing or the like, he was examining places that appeared suitable to meet up with Elu and checking for escape routes in case he were to run away from the town.

Along the way, Harold hit upon an idea.

He was going to ask the two people from the Stellar tribe about their real names, and if that was no good, then he would give them names. That would be more convenient and would create a sense of affinity between them and Harold.

Even though they had lost their ability to talk, they hadn't lost their intelligence or their ability to think. So, unless their memories were erased, they would probably be able to communicate by writing.

Though he first praised himself for having such a good idea, he felt dejected by his brain a few seconds after that as it had taken him several days to realize something so simple. If Elu or Justus were in his stead, they would have come up with the idea the moment they were introduced to the two people of the

Stellar tribe.

Every time Harold thought of these kinds of things, he would realize the differences between him and the others and would get close to being discouraged. But still, he believed this idea of his would surely prove to be right.

Chapter 77

The next day, having some time to spare before going to Bloche village in the evening, Harold invited the duo from the Stellar tribe to his room. Then, he made them sit at a round table that came with the room and put pens and papers in front of them.

He was standing motionless in front of the two people who were sitting expressionlessly.

"Hereafter, I'll be asking you some questions, bastards. You can't answer with your mouth but you can write down letters, right?"

They didn't show any reactions to Harold's sharp gaze, but he started asking his questions regardless.

"First, write down your names, morons."

As Harold said that, the two people surprisingly easily spelled letters on their blank paper sheets. Although his idea had just happened to come into his mind, it seemed like that didn't make it any less valid.

They finished writing almost simultaneously. Harold took a look at each of their papers.

"Lilium"

"Ventus"

Those seemed to be the young woman and young man's names, respectively. Harold kept going and made them write their ages, and it turned out that Lilium was 16 years old while Ventus was 22 years old.

This was going very smoothly so far, however, "What's your favorite thing to do? What are you thinking about right now? Do you want to be freed from being treated as dolls and to go back to how things were before?" when Harold asked them that, the two people's hands did not move at all. After thinking for a little while, Harold changed the general direction of his questions.

"How about your height?"

The answers were "151 cm" for Lilium, and "178 cm" for Ventus.

"Your dominant arm?"

The answer was "left" for Liliium, and "right-handed" for Ventus.

"Do you have any memory from before you were captured by Justus?"

Both did not answer.

"What do you think of Justus?"

Again, there was no answer from both of them.

"Do you have any combat experience from an actual fight?"

Liliium answered "no" and Ventus answered "Yes."

"Is it possible for you to use magic?"

Both Liliium and Ventus answered "It's possible."

"What's the structure of your family?"

Liliium answered "Father, mother, elder sister", as for Ventus, he answered "Parents, grandmother."

"Is it troublesome for you to answer questions?"

Both Liliium and Ventus did not answer.

After that, Harold repeated all the question while trying to figure out the pattern behind which ones they did or did not reply to.

Eventually, what he realized was that their answers were objective facts while the questions that involved their feelings and personal opinions were left unanswered. Though he didn't know whether that was because Justus had suppressed their feelings, it seemed like he would not be able to get them to give any answers about their memories, which were the best source of information.

That was probably a security measure that Justus had applied on them. In other words, there was a chance that the two people had information, but there was currently no way to get it out of them.

Therefore, Harold left that aside for the time being.

For now, he was able to get to know the two people's names anyway, which was his original objective. Though he didn't know if treating them like people

with an actual personality would have a positive effect, at the very least, knowing their names would make it easier for him to communicate with them. Meanwhile, someone knocked on the room's door. When Harold opened it, an employee of the inn was standing behind it.

Apparently, someone had handed the employee a letter saying he wanted him to hand it over to a black haired man with red eyes who was staying at the inn. Though Harold asked the employee about the appearance of the one who made that request, while making sure that the two people from the Stellar tribe could not hear him, it didn't seem like that person was Elu.

Perhaps he had simply used some sort of disguise or diversion, or perhaps it was really another person. But there was no mistaking that the letter was from Elu.

How did he know Harold was staying here? His information network was as amazing as ever.

For the time being, Harold made Liliun and Ventus leave as he read the letter. The message said that things were progressing perfectly well and that the plans which Harold and Elu had decided on beforehand could be executed without a problem. Therefore, Elu had definitely sneaked into this town already.

So, when the sky was dyed by the shade of the evening, Harold and the duo started moving under the cover of the dark.

It took about five hours on foot from the town to Bloche village. Since they just departed, they were going to arrive late at night.

Of course, it would have been faster if they used horses, and Harold could have prepared some beforehand. But he was afraid of the possibility that Liner would be unable to catch up to them in the fog valley if they escaped on horseback after stealing the sword. Therefore, Harold decided to go on foot, like the black robed people did in the original story.

Incidentally, the fog valley, like its name implied, was a valley that was covered in a dense fog.

In the game, that was where Liner caught up with the criminals who stole his sword. Although he got back the sword, it was stolen once again when Liner was struck by another individual who was accompanying the offenders. It wasn't really clear why the gang of criminals would come to a halt in a place like

that, but it wasn't hard to figure that out seeing how convenient it was for the game's protagonist, Liner.

However, normally, such a convenient turn of events would probably not occur. But in this world, there was someone behind the scenes with knowledge about the game's original story, which made him the strongest individual in a way. Needless to say, that was Harold.

After stealing the sword, the group of three was going to slightly delay their return, and then, this time around, they would pass through the town neighboring the village while hiding their faces with their black robes. If they left an impression on the people as a trio wearing black robes that left towards the fog valley, then Liner & co would be able to chase closely after them with almost no time lag.

Afterwards, Harold would just have to wander around at the bottom of the valley with a suitable pretext, then Liner and Colette would surely show up.

While he was simulating his future actions, Harold was annihilating the monsters that occasionally came to attack him over the course of approximately five hours, until Bloche village finally came in sight. The village seemed to be enclosed in wooden walls and gates, but unlike in the royal capital, there were no guards to be found.

Though the gates were closed, that was not a problem. Harold gathered a little momentum, then leaped on the side of the wall with his right leg, then his left, and jumped up. By doing so, he was able to reach the top of the four meters high wall.

With his eyes having grown accustomed to the dark, Harold observed the inside of the wall, but there was no sign of a single person in sight. After confirming that, he jumped down from the wall and landed without a sound.

However, neither Liliun nor Ventus followed behind him. Thinking that maybe they could not climb, Harold quietly retracted the gate's lock and opened it. Thereupon, the two people entered.

He had heard from Justus that their combat efficiency was supposed to be high, and judging their fight in the game, they should have been able to pull off a stunt of this level.

Well, he had no time to worry about these things, so he promptly started

moving again.

Only the weak moonlight was illuminating the dark of the late night. Sometimes, even that light would be interrupted as thin clouds obstructed the moon.

Within such darkness, it would be difficult to really see the gang that was dressed in black from top to bottom. In the first place, there wasn't even anyone outside to identify them.

It seemed like most of the villagers were asleep. There wasn't even a single house with its lights still on, which was convenient for Harold's group.

In addition to the map that was handed to him beforehand, Harold could also use his memories from the game to figure out the location of the place where Liner lived. Especially since he had a bird's eye view of the scenery still in his head, so it didn't take him much time to find Liner's residence.

While hiding under cover near said residence, Harold examined the situation. Just like the surrounding houses, their lights had been turned off. Apparently, they had fallen asleep.

While he still did pay close attention to the house's state of affairs, Harold quickly and stealthily drew near another structure. His objective was not in the house but in a warehouse that was separated from it.

That was where the "Glamb Grand" sword was supposed to be stored. He cut what seemed to be the door's padlock in two, with a single stroke of his sword, and went inside. As one would expect, the internal structure of the warehouse was not part of Harold's knowledge. He did not want to lose too much time here, for it would be troublesome for him if he was found out before he found the sword, as he would have to run away.

The inside of the warehouse was fortunately not very big, but it was dark. Therefore, Harold lit up a torch that was hidden in his robe, so as to look for the sword.

An important object would not be put in a place where objects were in a mess, arranged in a cluster, and the like. Narrowing down the search's range by excluding the places where they did not have to search, made the task easier for the group.

With that, after about 15 minutes, they found a more than one-meter long,

rectangular iron box, which was hidden behind some pots and baskets that were lined up on a shelf. Harold took off the lid and opened the box, and there it was. The real, authentic, Glamb Grand sword.

It had a wide leather shoulder strap that served to make it easy to lift it, which Harold made Ventus use to carry it.

Telling them he was going to check the surroundings, Harold made Liliun and Ventus stay in the warehouse and went outside. While he pretended to scout the area, he threw a small stone at a glass window and broke it into pieces. He felt sorry but if this mission were to fail, everything he had done would be for naught.

A shrill sound echoed as if tearing through the dark night. With this, the Griffith family, including Liner, would definitely jump up to their feet thinking there was an accident. Harold retraced his steps and returned to the warehouse, even though he himself thought he was being too shameless, that would not have been clear at all to an outsider's eye, as Harold pretended to be irritated and spoke to the two people of the stellar tribe.

"This is gonna be annoying. I don't know the reason, but there is a chance that our presence has been exposed."

Even when Harold told them that, the complexions of the two people did not change. Thinking that he expected as much, Harold opened the warehouse's door just a little bit so as to take a look outside, where Olbel and Leona, Liner's parents, were already watching their surroundings while holding weapons in their hands.

They slowly approached towards the warehouse where Harold and the others were hiding. Harold temporarily went away from the door, and once again, he quickly returned to the two people accompanying him and instructed them about their next actions.

"At my signal, you'll have to immediately dash outside together. Moreover, there are two skilled people there right now, but you two should be able to manage them by yourselves. However, if you kill them, we'll have some more troublesome work to deal with afterwards. Just hurt them enough so that they won't be able to chase after you later on, and then leave. Even if there are any reinforcements, just ignore them and leave regardless, alright?"

Although they only answered with nods, it seemed like they understood. Having confirmed this, Harold sharpened his senses to detect the presences outside. His detection abilities had risen enough that he could consciously find the presences in his surroundings to some extent.

Making good use of that, Harold waved his left arm to signal that Olbel and Leona were about one meter away. In response to that, Lilium and Ventus dashed out.

However, contrary to Harold's expectations, the surprise attack was not a success for Olbel and Leona had properly prepared themselves to intercept it thanks to their past as adventurers. They stopped the first attack and immediately turned to the offensive. As a result, the Stellar tribe duo was attacked before they could recover from their initial movements.

"... Who are you? What were you doing in the warehouse?"

"....."

"Not gonna talk, are you? You've got some guts. Then we'll just have to catch you and make you confess!"

Lilium, who was in charge of confronting Leona, handled her opponent's attacks one after another by skillfully using her two curved swords. The two fighters were compatible with each other as they both made the best use of their short bodies to support their agile natures and many of their moves. On the other hand, after losing his advantage, Ventus, who was using his long spear, was slightly pushed back by Olbel. In pure strength, Ventus had the advantage, but when it came to battle techniques, Olbel was more than twice as proficient.

So then, Olbel used that opportunity to destroy Ventus' guard. But in that instant when the fight's balance was about to collapse...

A dark grey shiny curved sword approached Olbel at a high speed. He narrowly avoided it and saw it pass before his eyes and pierce into the ground.

The one who threw the sword ran toward Olbel's direction to chase after it. Leona tried to launch an attack at her back, but Lilium jumped right on time. As if on cue, Ventus rearranged his stance and threw his long spear with all his body's strength.

That power was truly a windstorm. Having deemed that he would not be able to dodge in time, Olbel tried to block it with his sword, but Ventus' spear, which was propelled by centrifugal force, easily broke it. The long spear continued its advance and bit into Olbel's flank, blowing his 180 centimeter muscular body several meters back.

"Aaaah"

"Olbel!"

Upon witnessing that scene, his wife, Leona, shouted. For an instant, her focus had completely turned to Olbel.

Lilium did not have the kindness to miss such an opportunity.

After recovering the curved sword she had thrown, she immediately turned around, and while lowering her body close to the ground, she slipped through the path of Ventus' spear and kept rushing forward, aiming for Leona. Even though she was in a situation where she would likely fall prey to the spear if she raised her body ever so slightly, she did not hesitate for a second, and her speed did not falter at all either.

When Leona escaped from the windstorm in turn, Lilium was already right in front of her. At this point, the outcome of the battle had been decided. Having noticed her opponent Lilium, Leona somehow responded but she was made to drop her weapon before she could ready her stance, furthermore, her left foot was slashed at.

"Arghh!"

Leona fell to her knees while frowning from the pain. Olbel was breathing roughly as he fell down, unable to raise his body.

None of their injuries were fatal, but with those wounds, the couple would not be able to chase after Lilium and Ventus. The duo had perfectly executed Harold's instructions. He could only give his seal of approval to Justus' outstanding work.

At that exact time, Liner finally intruded into the situation.

"Yaaaaah!"

The timing was suitable for a surprise attack, but if he was going to raise his voice like that, then his advantage wasn't going to be of much use.

Though it was the thought of Harold, who was looking from the sidelines, the blow seemed to be sharper than he expected as it managed to cut off part of Ventus' robe. His face was then exposed by the moonlight that shined through the clouds.

It seemed like Liner had also properly saved that image through his eyes.

"Step back, Liner!"

With his current power, Liner would be defeated if he fought here. At worst, he would die.

Having actually fought the assailants, Leona apparently understood that as she tried to make Liner fall back.

However, Liner Griffith was not the kind of weak being that would step back in a situation like this.

"You step back, father, mother, it's dangerous!"

"This is just a scratch, step back already!"

"No!"

Liner had a strong willpower, the conviction to always keep going, and a solid resolution. There was only one thing he was lacking—— strength.

To become strong, he needed experience, and from here on, he was going to start piling it up. By the end of that journey, he would reach the top as a hero who saved the world.

Harold was going to witness the beginning of that heroic tale. Any fan of『Brave Hearts』would be excited by that scene. He was trembling with eagerness as he hid under cover.

However, he could not do so forever.

While Liner and his parents were concentrated on the intruders, Harold soundlessly escaped from the warehouse and blended with the dark. As for Lilium and Ventus, having recognized Liner as reinforcement, they withdrew without fighting either.

At that time, when Harold looked at Liner's dejected facial expression as he left, it looked all the more promising to him.

Chapter 78

(Harold's pov)

Having stolen the Griffith family's Gram Grand treasured sword, Harold's group directly returned to the town neighboring the village. One way or another, they were able to come back to their inn before dawn. Harold temporarily took off his robe and entered his room as if he was guilty of nothing. When he was finally alone, he sat at his bed and let out a long sigh. On top of his physical tiredness from his ten hours long round trip, he was guilty of trespassing, robbery and assault; being responsible for that triple combo of crimes, tortured his conscience and placed a massive mental burden on him. There were many bad rumors about him, but this was the first time he did something so clearly evil. It was not a pleasant feeling.

He looked at the rectangular box that was leaning against the wall. It seemed pretty neat and it didn't look like it had been carefully stored in a versatile warehouse among other object up until a few hours prior. The night was over, and the shining light of the morning sun was starting to faintly enter through the room's window. From here, this sword was going to be an important factor with great influence upon the fate of the story..... Or rather, of this world.

Suddenly, a certain development went through Harold's head, what if he obediently let Liner snatch the sword back from him? The Gram Grand sword was highly efficient, fitting of being called a treasured sword. If Liner got accustomed to it from the get go, perhaps he would eventually master that sword. However, once he got back the sword, Liner would probably simply enter the knight order. In which case, he wouldn't end up getting involved with the incident that Justus was going to trigger, nor with Justus' plans, and the probability that Liner wouldn't go through the process of solving the problem would therefore increase.

Although he was thinking about whether returning the sword would be wise, considering it would make him unable to guide things towards the original story's direction, the time between when he was given the order and when he went to execute it was too short for him to devise a plan anyway. Moreover,

Harold wasn't eloquent enough to ask for Elu's cooperation without him finding out about Harold's knowledge concerning the game and the future, and even just influencing Elu while hiding the truth from him would be almost impossible. Besides, above all, Harold didn't know what his standpoint would be if he were to fail his mission. So, rather than to take such a huge gamble, he decided that it was wiser to make use of his current position to get to know the whereabouts of the treasures and to control the pace at which they would be collected to some extent. Therefore, finding fault with the situation was useless. He had no other choice than to accept his fate and prepare himself to steal and maybe more. All he could do was wish that he wouldn't be exposed as the leader of the black robed thieves.

While thinking about such things, Harold sank into a deep sleep as the sun rose, and surrendered himself to a temporary rest.



(Elu's pov)

At the time when the traffic in the streets of the Bloche village became busy enough, the members of Frieri, including Elu, started taking action. They pretended to have no relation to each other, and they scattered through the village while acting as if they were simply visiting the place for some business they had. In a small village like that one, they'd probably be able to gather information with some considerable accuracy. Elu soon started interacting with the villagers while playing the part of a young peddler who just happened to come visit the village, and he caught onto the information which confirmed his assumption.

"The previous night, some thief entered into the Griffiths' residence."

While two women at a shop's storefront, who were probably the shopkeeper and a client, were in the middle of some idle gossip about that, the topic of their conversation reached the ears of Elu, who was nearby. But he hadn't gotten any contact from Harold by the morning so Elu already knew the mission was a success. For the time being, Harold had managed to clear the first step, so they were off to a superb start.

"Say, miss, is that story true?"

Elu tried to indirectly bring up the subject with a shopper next to him, who had probably accidentally heard the idle gossip just like he did since she was very close. The woman in her forties was very pleased by the question of Elu, who had referred to her as miss. It wasn't clear whether it was because she was delighted to be called miss, or whether she was actually just itching to talk, but her mouth easily let loose.

"Yes, apparently, he broke in there to rob them."

"That seems quite violent for such a peaceful village. Are the people from that house all right?"

"The master of that house and his wife were slashed at and have been hospitalized. Fortunately, it seems like their injuries ended up being minor, but for the thief to actually wound that couple, it's really..."

"Are the Griffiths skilled people?"

"It has been awhile since they retired but they used to be adventurers. Even now, whenever there is a monster which is dangerous to be near to, even for the village's most skilled people, it's always that couple that takes the lead and exterminates it."

"That is to say, to surpass that Griffith couple, that burglar had to be quite talented. He must be a terrifying person."

"You're right. That's why this is a hot topic in the village. I won't be able to have a peaceful sleep tonight thinking that he could enter into my house."

Well, it was pointless to worry since the thief had already left the village. But this was a very natural reaction for the villagers who thought this incident was just a simple robbery, especially since their means of self-defense were scarce. However, leaving that aside, there was one more thing to confirm.

"What kind of person was that burglar? If someone saw him, the good thing to do would be to let people know what the thief looked like, or what he was dressed like at least, just in case, but..."

"Well, though I didn't hear it directly from them, it seems like the Griffiths said that there were actually two burglars."

They were two. The situation was exactly as Harold has said beforehand. In case there was a battle, Harold would disappear and he would command the two people from the Stellar tribe to stay. That was one of the many decisions he had taken. For that battle-loving Harold to withdraw furtively, he probably wanted to lower the risk of being found out by a third party as being part of the thieves' gang as it would be very likely that they would know his face. That turn of events would certainly bring some trouble to Harold. *Well, I don't quite see the point of worrying about these things by now though*, thought Elu.

For now, he had obtained the information he wanted. What he currently had to do was search for the boy named Liner and the girl named Colette as Harold had asked him to. According to Harold's words, Liner was the only son of the Griffith family that came up earlier, and Colette was his childhood friend. For Harold to know them that much, it either meant he was acquainted with them, or that he wanted to get them involved in all this for some reason. Although Elu was worried about that, he did not ask about it as he knew that if he did, he would just be rejected and be told "It's none of your business."

Harold's name was quite well-known, in a bad way, so Elu couldn't just bring it up with Liner. It seemed like he was going to be associating with him for a long time anyway, so he was eventually going to have an opportunity to find out what was the relationship between those two. But first, Elu needed to get acquainted with Liner. His parents were hospitalized due to their injuries so he was likely in the hospital as well.

However, Harold had suspected that Liner and that childhood friend would soon chase his group after the theft of the sword. If that prediction was right, then there was not much time for leisure. After bringing the flow of his conversation with the woman to an end in a natural way, Elu headed towards his next destination, the hospital.

The Bloche village wasn't very big so it was easy to figure out where the Griffith couple was hospitalized. It was slightly old, yet quite cozy, however, rather than a hospital, it was more appropriate to call it a clinic. Yet, it seemed like this was the village's sole medical institution. "The reserves of medicine that I keep in my journey for emergencies are almost finished, so I'd like to replenish my supplies." Using that pretext, Elu visited the clinic.

In the clinic, there was an examining room for the outpatients, a treatment room, and a waiting room, with only a single sofa for three people in it. Moreover, there were only a few beds for the inpatients.

Elu thought this was insufficient, considering this was the village's sole medical institution. But according to a nurse whom he chatted with during his waiting time, recuperating at one's own home and using home remedies was the standard in the village. It seemed like only seriously ill or seriously injured patients would come to the clinic.

"Even so, it doesn't seem like my turn is ever going to come."

Elu daringly grumbled that so as to guide the topic of the conversation, using it as an excuse despite having a rough idea about the situation.

"Do you have something in particular to do after this?"

"No, nothing special. I'm planning to stay for a few days so it's not a problem, but I thought there weren't any other patients and that I wouldn't even have to be called."

"Yes, actually, right now, there are people here who have been hospitalized urgently."

"You're talking about the Griffiths?"

"Huh? How did you know?"

"Because everyone in the village is talking about that, it's a hot topic."

"I see."

Said the nurse, consenting to Elu's words. The Griffith couple, who were skilled as former adventurers, were injured by thieves who had trespassed into their house; that's what she was going to talk about, just like the shopper did some time earlier. That was why Elu had started off the topic as if that story had just come to his mind.

"However, I heard the Griffiths' injuries were minor, but still, they were hospitalized, so maybe..."

"Oh, it's okay, no need to worry like that. The hospitalization was mainly for them to rest and for us to watch over the progress of their treatment, they'll be

leaving the hospital in two or three days."

Elu thought this would be difficult to bring up as it was related to the patients' privacy, but the nurse easily spilled the beans about the Griffith couple's medical condition. *Turns out preparing all those coaxing techniques to draw out information was pretty useless. Well, this reduces my troubles so I guess it doesn't matter.* Thought Elu.

"Good to hear. People have been talking about this story so much that even I came to be worried."

"Well, this is a small village. The problems of others are often our problems as well."

"Well, even without that, it's only natural that you would feel worried thinking that you might be attacked by such skilled burglars."

"That's right, and why even bother to come all the way to such a remote village just to steal from people? They're being an annoyance and wasting their time."

Her complaint was justifiable, but the thing was that Harrison had deemed the treasured sword as being worth that much. Well, based on Harold's words, Justus also had something to do with that choice. The fact that Harrison felt like having Harold and the others under his command was surely a part of Justus' plan as well; and Harold appeared to have an idea about the contents of that plan. Although Harold never spoke about said contents, they probably brought about some serious circumstances considering that Harold was obediently doing that kind of job. That was Elu's conjecture about the overall situation, though he had no clear evidence.

In the end, the key to unraveling the truth was probably the treasured sword. Though Elu had not seen the real thing, he did acquire some information about it. Far below the earth, and deep into its crust; it was said that there was a giant, solid astral body, which was the core of the continent. That astral body was scraped and processed to produce a total of seven weapons.

Elu didn't know if it was a true story, nor did he know how one could possibly arrive so far below the earth. Even the existence of solid astral bodies was likely a fake story that started off as a rumor, which was embellished over the years,

and in the end, it gave birth to an exaggerated anecdote. Its origin was probably some kind of falsehood that the blacksmith who forged the sword came up with to raise his own fame and the sword's value. That was the most reasonable and realistic speculation.

However, Elu couldn't say whether Harold and Justus took that into account or not. So, Elu, having judged that it would be worth examining deeply, had already started his investigation. But it wasn't only Elu himself, for he also made use of the Giffelt organization's capabilities. Depending on the results, perhaps he would realize what those two were trying to do.

Although it wasn't an act of betrayal towards Harold, Elu still thought it would be better to do it in secrecy, as Harold most likely wouldn't appreciate Elu's investigation. Even though they weren't able to build trust between each other as of yet, Elu still needed to make things look good on the surface to keep a smooth progress going in their collaborative relationship.

"Ah, looks like it's finally over."

Said the nurse, who had kept the conversation going while Elu was indulging in his thoughts. Moreover, as if in response to that, the door that led to the examining room opened. The one who came out of it was a slightly plump grizzled man. He was in his fifties and had quite the friendly face.

Together with that man, appeared a red-haired boy and blond-haired girl. The expressions on their faces weren't great but their looks matched Harold's description. This boy and girl were very likely Liner and Colette. Harold had hypothesized that they would become key persons in "something" that was coming now or perhaps soon in the future. The role that Elu was given was to support them from the shadows. Therefore, so as to slip into Liner and the others' hearts, Elu put on an extremely natural and refreshing smile intended for the duo's eyes which met with his.

"Hello. My name is Elu, I'm a traveling merchant."

This was the moment of the first encounter between the three people, who were one day going to share their destinies.

Chapter 79

(Colette's pov)

When Colette came out of the Hospital room with Liner, besides the nurse, there was someone else she had not seen before.

The androgynous person had a friendly looking smile as he introduced herself as being called Elu. Colette got the impression that the person was around the same age as her and Liner or maybe younger.

Elu said that he arrived at this village on this very day as a certain merchant's apprentice, and the moment he said that he came from the neighboring town, Liner butted in.

"On your way to the village, did you see a pair of people concealing themselves with black robes?!"

With Liner's words, Colette's bad presentiment turned into conviction. Liner was planning to chase after the robbers who had taken away the sword and attacked his parents.

Thinking about it normally, that was going to be difficult. Usually, Liner's parents were the ones who trained him, in other words, they were stronger than him, and yet, even they were defeated by the thieves. Therefore, challenging the robbers by himself would be akin to suicide for Liner. Moreover, if Elu were to testify that he happened to see the people who had attacked the Griffiths, Liner would likely immediately go run after them.

Which was why Colette wanted Elu to answer that he didn't see them and didn't know about them. However, that prayer was left unheard.

"Come to think of it, I'm pretty sure uncle told me he saw some suspicious people walking around at night. But I don't know about them being two."

"Really?!"

"Yeah, I'll ask him for more details."

Their talk progressed swimmingly.

The uncle Elu mentioned seemed to be the merchant that he followed.

Following Elu, Colette and Liner went along with him to one of the few inns in

the village.

Elu left the two of them waiting for a little while and went to the inn's second floor.

After several minutes, he appeared again while leading the way for a certain man.

"Sorry for the wait. Uncle, these are the two people I told you about earlier, Liner and Colette."

"Hello. I've heard your story, looks you've been through some great trouble."

"Yes..... Well, about that, I've heard you've seen someone suspicious yesterday, do you remember what he was like?"

"What he was like, huh? I was walking around at night with only one lamp to light the road, so it was pretty dark and I wasn't seeing all that clearly, but.... That is right, I saw two persons' silhouettes. They were wearing robes low over their eyes even though it was the middle of the night."

"Anything else?"

"It also looked like they were holding a box or something, it was long and narrow."

"That was them, that was definitely them!"

Liner suddenly exclaimed, with a loud voice.

Those two people were wearing robes and holding a long and narrow box.

Moreover, the direction of their escape also matched the thieves'.

With all those conditions together, it was extremely likely that the two of them were the burglars. In short, this meant that Liner's course of action was now clearly decided, unfortunately.

"I can't waste any time, I've gotta hurry and go after them...!"

"C-calm down Liner."

"She's right. There are preparations to do before chasing them, because even if you go after them now in a hurry, you won't be able to catch up with them."

As Colette tried to calm Liner down, she was backed up by Elu's extremely calm comment that made perfect sense.

As a result, the blood that had risen in Liner's head dropped down a little, and he lowered the tone of his voice.

"B-but... no matter what, I want to get back the sword they stole. That sword is very important to me."*(Liner)*

"Even so, fighting against the people whom even Leona and Olbel weren't able to defeat is too dangerous."*(Colette)*

"I know, but still, you want me to let them get away with what they did?"
(Liner)

"That's not what I said! You already know what they look like and you can describe them, so if you ask the guards or the knight order for help, they will surely capture them."*(Colette)*

"If I use such a slow method, they could have time to escape!"*(Liner)*

Liner was heating up once again. Moreover, as if lured by that, Colette's tone was becoming rough as well.

No matter what they did, the two people's opinions were like two parallel lines. Then, a clack noise resounded as if to interrupt the two people's quarrel. The source of the sound was Elu, who had clapped his hands together.

"You two should calm down. Whether you chase after the thieves or contact the guards, you better hurry and do it. Your success regarding this matter will depend on how fast you'll act."

"Yes, that's certainly true..."

"Or rather, I think you should have contacted the guards earlier, but still, both of your choices are not bad."

Colette had nothing to answer back. She was confused and therefore could not think that far, but beyond that, with Colette's anxiousness and fear that Liner would chase after the thieves, it was hard to say that she was thinking straight at all.

With a sidelong glance at Colette, Elu took out a pen and parchment out of his big shoulder bag, and spoke with a sweet smile.

"Drawing portraits is my specialty. If you've seen what they look like, then tell

me. That can be kind of useful when searching for criminals."



(Elu's Pov)

Elu let out a small sigh while looking at the portrait and description he drew and wrote himself.

Harold's actions seemed to be well-thought-out, but did his escape go all that well? He wondered.

The person Liner had informed Elu about was a young man with somewhat hollow cheeks and purple hair. The testimony said he had no life in his eyes, and that was likely because he was missing his emotions, as Harold had said.

If this were to spread, it would assuredly become difficult for Harold and the others to move. No matter what, Harold could not afford to just hide his face all the time. Someone who did that would stand out, and if he often came in contact with people's eyes that way, it would increase the risks of him having his true identity exposed.

But it was a simple matter really.

Telling them he was going to deliver the portrait to the guards, Elu temporarily separated from Liner and Colette. Then, as soon as he came into an area with no one around, he put the portrait away inside his bag.

By chance, this time, he was able to prevent it from being reported, which was really fortunate. Although it wasn't Harold's own face, Elu did not believe that Harold would let his partner's face be exposed on purpose, but this happening was a complete surprise so he wasn't sure.

While he was adding the finishing touches to the portrait, Elu had indirectly investigated, and it turned out that Liner had yet to inform the other adults or the clinic's doctors about the fact that he had seen the burglar's face.

If Elu got rid of the portrait, then it would somewhat reduce Harold's chances of falling into a troublesome situation. So, he naturally chose to conceal the truth, in case this was not part of Harold's plans.

For now, since he was going to send a messenger on a fast horse to Harold's place, Elu was going to have him confirm if having his partner's face exposed was intentional or not. If it turned out to actually be intentional, Elu would just

have to go back and notify the right place about said partner's portrait and description.

The process was more troublesome than it should be, but that was because Harold would always stubbornly give as little information as possible. He was probably thinking that there was no need to give more information than he had to. In short, he did not trust Elu.

If Elu at least knew the goals behind Harold's actions, he would be able to move somewhat more easily, but....

Well, I can lament about this all I want, but it just can't be helped.

Elu had other things to worry about.

He thought back upon his exchange with Liner and Colette from some time ago. Although Liner wanted to promptly chase after the burglars, Colette was using the appropriate means, seeking for a solution through a third party. It didn't matter who was right and who was wrong. If things stayed as they were, the two people's opinions would diverge, so there was a risk that, in the end, only Liner would start pursuing Harold.

From Harold's words, those two were both going to chase after him. Or at least, that was certainly what he was expecting.

Then, what if Liner and Colette were to act differently from each other?

This was yet another troublesome story, but for some reason, it was going to be necessary for Elu to have Colette pursue Harold and the others. For the time being, he was going to tell Harold through the messenger on the fast horse that there was a chance Liner and Colette would take different actions from each other.

Then Elu would wait for a reply while observing the two people.

While thinking of these things, Elu returned to the two people's location. However, Liner was nowhere to be seen.

"Huh? What happened to Liner?"(Elu)

"... He's preparing himself to go chase after those people."(Colette)

She was probably referring to him preparing his weapons and equipment. Liner was really thorough, perhaps he was planning to go chase after them immediately right now.

Colette, who was thinking of that, was looking gloomy, as Elu expected.

"Are you worried about Liner?"(Elu)

"Yes. No matter how I think about it, this is going to be dangerous...."(Colette)

"True. But if that's what you think, then why not accompany him?"(Elu)

"That's impossible. I am bad at fighting...."(Colette)

Bad at fighting, Colette had said. Perhaps that in itself was true. However, on her legs and thighs, there were holders, made of black leather, where a round rod could fit. Though there were nothing there, the holders were likely made to put weapons inside them.

Being bad at fighting and being unable to fight were not really the same thing. Given that she had been with Liner from her childhood, it wasn't hard at all to think that she had received some kind of initiation into martial arts from Liner's parents.

With that in mind, was it her natural character that made her so extremely conscious of being bad at fighting? Or was there some incident in the past that planted in her the feeling of wanting to avoid fighting?

(In the past, huh? Which reminds me, Harold was talking as if he was acquainted with Colette and Liner...)

At that moment, the face of his collaborator whose past, or rather, whose entire history he couldn't figure out at all, came to Elu's mind.

Let's investigate a little while including that part in the search, thought Elu.

"Even so, I wonder, just what kind of people were the burglars who broke into Liner's house?"(Elu)

"What kind?"(Colette)

"I chose my words poorly, but this is a small village far away from the royal capital, there can't be that many valuable things here, right? Yet they went through the trouble of coming to steal here, so I think they had a precise goal."
(Elu)

"Was that goal the stolen sword? Wasn't that just a coincidence?"(Colette)

"So the burglars who came and stole the sword just happened to be stronger

than Liner's parents, who used to be adventurers? A coincidence like that seems very unlikely to me."(*Elu*)

Such a happenstance would need a huge number of consecutive coincidences. This case was obviously all planned out.

When it came to the crunch, the duo's actions would depend on whether they had the recognition to notice things like that or not. So, Elu wanted Liner and Colette to obtain the awareness to see things with a doubtful eye. Maybe it was because they were born in the countryside, but those two were too honest.

"Certainly, when you put it like that..."(*Colette*)

"Is the stolen sword worth that much? I'm a little curious."(*Elu*)

No matter what, treasured swords were thought to be a thing of fantasies. That naturally tickled the interest of the lump of intellectual curiosity that was Elu.

Moreover, for Justus to go through such roundabout means to collect the sword, there was no way that it had nothing special to it.

"Apparently, Liner's father and mother discovered the sword in a dungeon when they were adventurers."(*Colette*)

"A dungeon? Sounds exciting."(*Elu*)

"Really?"(*Colette*)

"I mean, that's the classic example when you think of getting rich quick, isn't it?"(*Elu*)

So as to explore Colette's past, Elu first made some small talk with her, in an attempt to become more friendly. He didn't feel there was any wariness to relax her from, but still, he couldn't suddenly rush into talking about things like this. He wasn't going to get results on this day nor on the day after, however, he was definitely going to meet her a lot from here on. If taking that into consideration, accumulating small interactions like this would be fruitful later in the future.

Afterwards, Elu and Colette kept chit-chatting about this and that while waiting for Liner.

Then, aiming for the moment when the conversation came to a pause, Elu

muttered something meaningfully.

"Anyway, about the black robed robbers..."

"Do you know something?"

"No. Just that, when speaking of black robes or people dressed completely in black, there is someone that really comes to mind, right?"

"Someone that comes to mind?"

"Did you not hear about him, Colette? His name is Harold Stokes."

The moment that name came up, Colette's complexion clearly changed. That was enough to tell without a doubt that there was some sort of connection between her and Harold.

Though she herself was trying to conceal her agitation, she seemed to be fatally bad at lying.

"I, I haven't heard of him."

"Is that so? He's famous in the royal capital. He's in the same age range as you and Liner, and yet he's called the kingdom's number one villain."

Colette's facial expression turned sad.

While observing that, Elu did not stop talking.

"He's a traitor who betrayed the country while being a knight and tried to cause a war. Moreover, he's a "knight killer", who left the knight order and then killed more than dozens of the knights that used to be his comrades. Those are the typical examples, but there is no end to the anecdotes about his heinous actions."

"....."

In the end, Colette kept silent. She cast her eyes down as if saying that she did not want to hear about those stories.

When they didn't know about the rumors regarding Harold, most people were surprised upon hearing of them, saying "Is there really someone that evil out there?". When they did know, they would agree, saying, "That guy is really one outrageous sinner."

So, then, what kind of person would show a reaction like Colette's?

Perhaps, for someone who knew of Harold's essence, so to speak, and therefore knew that he was not the villain from the rumors, Elu's story would indeed be unbearable to hear. In other words, maybe Colette was one of the rare people who got to experience the extremely difficult to understand kindness of Harold, whose mouth only let out scorn and cynicism.

"So, I'm thinking, maybe the criminal behind this time's theft was that Harold guy...."(Elu)

"That's not true! Harold would never....!"(Colette)

After that, she was likely going to say "never do that" but in the end, she did not let those words out. However, she wasn't refraining from talking because she had doubts about Harold, this was likely the result of her trying to stop the words that she let out of her mouth on an impulse.

But it was completely too late.

Colette's face quickly turned pale. As if she had said something that she was not supposed to say.

"Say, Colette..."(Elu)

"T-that's not it. Just now, that was not what I meant to say..."(Colette)

She shook her head from the left to the right, desperately repeating "That was not what I meant to say.". That state made her look much younger than her actual age, she also seemed frail and somewhat frightened.

For her to get this concerned about wanting to hide what she said, she was probably deeply involved with Harold's past. Elu was convinced of this, and so he made a decision, that could be said to be quite heartless, concerning Colette.

"I get it. I won't ask."(Elu)

Elu put on a smile on his face to make Colette feel relieved. Colette innocently thought she had easily deceived Elu, and she muttered a small "thank you". There was no way for her to know what was really going on in the mind of Elu, whom she had just thanked.

Colette Ameller. By looking into her past, one could probably get a glimpse at a part of Harold's secrets.

So, after that, Elu immediately started digging up Colette's past.

Chapter 80

(Harold's Pov)

In the dusk of the day that followed the theft of the treasured sword, a certain report came from Elu. Harold, who was thinking of starting to move by the end of the day under the cover of the dark of the night, was greatly agitated by that report which came just before his departure.

It was fine that Ventus' face was seen. It would have been a problem if that was not the case as the same had also happened in the original story.

『It's very likely that Colette won't follow after Liner. 』, that was the problematic part. According to Elu, while Liner wanted to chase after the criminals right away, it seemed like Colette's opinion was the complete opposite, as she believed chasing after them would be dangerous and that Liner had better stop himself and fall back.

Huh? Why did this happen? This was the honest doubt that Harold had at first. So he tried to look for an answer in his confused mind. Due to what had happened in the game, Harold had never considered the possibility that Liner and Colette would take separate actions.

Why would such a fatal deviation from the original story happen?

What was the difference between the Colette from this world and the original one? There was only one factor worth mentioning; Colette's mother, Clara, had survived. That was it.

Then, which changes had taken place because of that? In the original story, Colette had a grudge against Harold because of the irrational killing of her mother. That was likely the driving force that pushed her to train herself with Liner.

However, with her mother being alive, then wouldn't she have had no need to have any desire for revenge within her? This was not necessarily true, but considering that Colette had become a young lady who was far away from the bloody stench of the world of revenge and battle, there was nothing strange about her decision. Rather, it could even be said to be the normal choice to make.

Why would a girl like her follow after a childhood friend who was going to chase after actual robbers? For someone with common sense, the right choice would be to rely on professionals, although that did not seem to apply to Liner whose emotions always took precedence due to his reckless nature.

Well, putting that aside, Harold had a major problem to deal with. If Colette did not follow Liner, that would mean one less member for the main party, which would be a very hard blow to the team's war potential. In the game, despite her lovely appearance, Colette was a robust vanguard. Her physical attack value was the third highest among all the party members, and she had the highest HP and defense value. However, when it came to magic, she was helpless. Her attack magic could only inflict damage on lower-rank opponents, and she could not learn even a single recovery magic spell. Even Liner could use some minimal recovery magic, though it wasn't very effective. As a character, Colette did not seem very girly, rather, she had a muscle-brain's status that she made use of to wield a tonfa, with which she would beat her opponents to death.

Furthermore, adding to the decrease in numbers, Harold could not predict how this situation would change things from the flow of the game's story. So far, it had already broken the flag of Colette's revenge event, but there was a chance that, beyond this, the situation would have a big influence on the whole story. It was a difficult problem that had come into Harold's path many times in the past eight years.

At any rate, in order to keep the problem's influence to a minimum, and in order to control the developments that he knew of, Harold had to get Colette to join the party members by all means necessary. Although this was an early stage of the story, if Liner were to act solo, it could likely lead him to the worst outcome, death.

(What should I do? Though Elu said it's just a possibility, if he bothered to give that information, then it will almost certainly happen.)

Even if supposedly this was just a very unlikely worst case scenario, if said worst case scenario were to actually happen, then it would be too late to act upon it. Whether the possibility was high or low, if it could bring him danger,

then Harold could not overlook it.

Harold wanted to leave it to Elu, who was on site, and let him deal with the problem, but that would not do. Even if Harold were to get Elu to persuade Colette, there were no phones or emails in this world, so it would take some time for him to convey his intention to someone at a far away distance. Therefore, no matter how Harold would go about persuading Colette, if he didn't go to the Bloche village right away, he wouldn't be able to do anything.

It was around sunset. In his original plan, Harold was supposed to have left the town more than an hour before.

Moreover, he had already given Ventus and Liliu their action schedules. Telling them that they would be going through the fog valley after the sun made place for the dark, in order to make it hard for them to be found from their surroundings, and to evade the eyes of anyone that might have been pursuing them.

The two of them would not utter a complaint even if Harold simply split up from them at the last minute, but once that is exposed to Justus, maybe Harold would be asked about the reason for said change. With his ingenious brain, there was a chance that the mad scientist would start having doubts just from that.

He was Justus after all, a single opportunity could perhaps allow him to uncover every single one of Harold's secrets.

Then I have to find a solid pretext to split up from them, thought Harold. Based on the fact that Liner and the others' assailants were known to be two and even that Ventus' face was seen, it wasn't unimaginable that some eye-witnesses would catch up fast to the duo by relying on that information. If there were indeed people pursuing them, then Harold could turn the tables on them as the third, unknown member of the gang, by knocking them down by surprise. If, on the contrary, there were no pursuers, then the three people could just escape, as planned before. Moreover, by concealing himself within the dense fog of the fog valley, Harold could render his surprise attack many times more effective. With that many motives for it, it wasn't all that odd for him to split up from the group.

If he was asked why he went that far, he would just say that it was a

precautionary measure and it would settle the matter. If the pursuers did come, then there would be no mistake with Harold's judgement and Justus would not inquire too much.

While thinking that, he instructed Liliu and Ventus to split up from him with the pretext that, in consideration of the possibility that some pursuers would appear due to Ventus' face being seen, Harold was going to confirm whether anyone was following them to the fog valley, so as to clear his anxiety; and during then, if there were indeed some pursuers, he would get rid of them. He also told them to just wait on standby at the fog valley until he joined them. Naturally, the two people obediently followed his instructions.

When it came to those two, it was useless for Harold to worry about them getting killed by monsters. Also, just in case Liner would come in contact with Ventus and Liliu before Harold's return, he ordered them to figure out their opponents' abilities without killing them. This would surely reduce Liner's chances of getting killed.

Thus, after watching them leave together with the disappearance of the sun, Harold went towards the Bloche village, on foot.

Anyway, there was no more time to waste. In the game, Liner and Colette left for their journey a day after the incident. In other words, it was on this very day's morning, or perhaps at noon; either way, it was early in the day, so no matter what, Liner had surely already started moving.

Speaking of which, Liner is on one very forced schedule, thought Harold. In the span of a single, nightmarish evening, his parents were beaten up by some trespassing burglars and his treasured sword was stolen. Yet, as soon as the sun came, he directly went to chase after the criminals. It was safe to say that he was full of energy.

Well, Harold wasn't one to talk, he had gone to steal the sword in the last evening and returned to the inn before dawn, then, after only a few hours of sleep, he pushed himself on yet another late-night, five-hours-long walk for the second consecutive day.

He had also changed his action plan after receiving Elu's report, and had little time to actually put it into practice. If he arrived at his destination a little early, it would be possible for him to borrow a horse, but if that turned out to be impossible, he would only be able to rely on his own two feet.

After Harold advanced for tens of minutes at almost a running speed, his ears caught onto some peculiar noises.

There were dull metallic clanks, and a loud, beast-like voice. But it wasn't anything unusual, someone nearby was simply fighting a monster.

Harold was in a hurry, but when it came to the monsters that would appear in this area, there was none that Harold could not just instantly kill in passing. Therefore, while thinking that it wouldn't be bothersome for him to help out whoever was fighting if he was in a pinch, Harold approached the path where the battle seemed to be happening. In doing so, he identified the person's identity.

He had fire-like red hair, and a voice that Harold was quite familiar with. As it turned out, the one who was fighting against the monster was Liner, the protagonist of this world.

Harold narrowly bore with the impulse of saying "What the hell, it's you?!". Moreover, since he was concentrated on his fight, Liner fortunately did not notice Harold, who was hidden under the cover of the dark.

Therefore, Harold made use of that occasion to observe Liner's battle. The monster wasn't really strong, and there was a sense of stability to Liner's movements, so he was very unlikely to be defeated.

Although he appeared to have a few injuries, none of them seemed like they would prove to be fatal. Liner had likely obtained those wounds from fighting some other monsters while he was on his way towards here.

Despite being a little worried, Harold decided to ignore Liner and let him fend for himself.

He didn't think that Liner would be defeated by this monster even if he was fighting alone. Furthermore, the next town was right next to here, and there were no powerful monsters to be encountered on the way there.

But, above all was the fact that Harold was Liner's acquaintance. Being the friendly boy that he was, Liner would probably start getting all too familiar with Harold if he were to come across him. Harold regrettably did not have the time to do that at the moment, so he had rather avoid any contact with Liner.

Thus, Harold took his leave from the place, but not before altruistically leaving a recovery item on the path that Liner would likely take after beating the

monster. That was the best consideration that Harold could currently give him.

A few more hours after that, close to midnight, Harold finally arrived at the Bloche village.

By the side of the gate that served as the village's entrance, he noticed someone's presence. That person who was standing within the darkness was none other than Elu. It seemed like he had somehow foreseen Harold's actions and was waiting for him.

"You've come early."(*Elu*)

"Tell me about the situation."(*Harold*)

"Liner left by himself. It seems like your expectations were off."(*Elu*)

".....What about Colette?"(*Harold*)

"She was worried, but there were no signs that she had any intention to follow after him."(*Elu*)

Without any hesitation, Elu gave Harold the information he wanted. Perhaps it was selfish of Harold to be thinking "Then go persuade her already"; from the very start, this whole problem was brought upon by Harold's lack of foresight, so this would be quite a harsh demand considering that Elu knew nothing about the situation. Besides, Elu had properly accomplished what Harold had personally requested of him, which was to get acquainted with Liner and Colette.

I've gotta fix my own mistakes by myself, he thought.

"Prepare two horses. I don't care if it's the ones that you and the others ride."(*Harold*)

"When do you need them?"(*Elu*)

"You have an hour."(*Harold*)

"Alright."(*Elu*)

Elu readily consented to the sudden request, showing once again to Harold how reliable he was. Harold really appreciated the fact that Elu did not inquire more than necessary. He also asked him to give out some instructions to the Friery personnel that was still in the town where he had been staying.

Moreover, having acknowledged Elu's generous cooperation, Harold was now strongly determined to reward him no matter what, by bringing some actual results.

Once he separated from Elu, Harold went to look for Liner's house. From what he had heard, Colette and Clara's new home was neighboring Liner's residence. Harold had received that information from Zen, who used to peek into the Bloche village once in a while out of worry for Colette and Clara, and he had said that they seemed to be getting along with their neighbors. At the time, Harold had indirectly investigated the identity of said neighbors, and when the words "red-haired boy" came up, he was greatly delighted within the closure of his own mind.

As he recalled such things, Harold headed for his destination while relying on the moonlight to lead himself through the sceneries, which he still recalled, within the village that was not as small as the map of the game. If Colette did not accompany Liner, then she was surely at her home.

After advancing for a little while in the village that had fallen silent, Harold saw the house he was looking for. It was a two-storied house, that he had seen more times than he could count, there was also a wooden warehouse that was built beside it and a bungalow directly facing the house. Perhaps that bungalow was where Colette and Clara lived.

They had likely already gone to sleep as there was no light coming out of the windows. While apologizing in his mind, Harold knocked powerfully on the bungalow's door. The deep sound of the knocks echoed within the house. There was silence for a short while, then Harold felt some signs of movement from the opposite side of the door. However, the door did not open.

(Well, I guess it's only natural that they'd be vigilant of someone coming at such a late time. Especially since there are only two women there, all by themselves.)

Considering Colette's strength in the game, Harold didn't think she would lag behind any man out there, but that had nothing to do with it. Their reaction was all the more justifiable since some thieves had trespassed in the neighboring house the previous evening.

But, even so, Harold could not withdraw, and he did not want Colette and Clara

to be scared.

"Is anybody here? I'd like to ask about last night's robbery incident."(*Harold*)

For the time being, he tried to appeal to the fact that he was not a robber. However, his words alone were not enough to be trusted as the entrance door remained tightly closed.

Harold let out a sigh, and then, he decided to pull out his trump card. Even if his bad reputation had reached her, as the one who had saved the person's life, he would likely be welcomed inside. Thinking that, Harold pretentiously and conspicuously introduced his name to the person on the other side of the door.

"I know you're inside. If you're going to oppose me, Harold Stokes, then prepare yourself for the consequences because ——"

But Harold couldn't finish his line. That was because the door was powerfully opened before he got to do that, and he almost collided with it. He could tell from the other party's state and facial expression that she was extremely flustered. That person was Colette's mother, Clara. She was greatly surprised as she found herself before Harold, and her eyes opened wide with tears rising in their corners.

"It has been so long, Harold-sama...!"(*Clara*)

Chapter 81

Clara was crying. She was not raising her voice, but there were so many tears spilling down from her cheeks through the gaps between her fingers as she covered her face with her hands, that even the ground became wet. She could pretty much be said to be sobbing.

That confused Harold.

Certainly, considering he had saved Clara and her daughter Colette's life, crying from gratitude was an understandable reaction from her.

However, Harold was not guilt-free regarding the chain of incidents that had befallen the two of them. He had not done it on purpose, but that situation was only due to his own carelessness, coupled with the Stokes couple's false accusations. Clara was not at fault in the slightest, and yet, she and her daughter were forced to move from where they used to live. Given those details, rather than her being thankful to him to the point of crying, he felt like he should be the one seriously apologizing to her.

In addition, it had been about eight years since he had taken Harold's body. In that time, most people he had met with would only show him two feelings, fear or hatred. It had been a long time since he had grown accustomed to those circumstances.

This was why he was stumped on how to interact with such frontal feelings of gratitude. However, he knew that the current situation looked bad from an objective point of view. A man was making a widow cry at her front door in the dark of the night; such a scene would probably immediately be reported to the authorities.

For the time being, Harold had to make Clara settle down and show him inside the house.

"Are you freaking done yet? I recall saying that I have questions to ask."

"M-my apologies. Sorry if the house doesn't look too good, but please do come inside."

As she said that, Clara made way for Harold towards the wooden bungalow. A lamp was on with its light illuminating the house's interior that was certainly

modest when compared to Harold's living environment. However, even though it was small, it was a neat living space which was not displeasing in the slightest from the point of view of Harold, who still couldn't let go of his common man's way of thinking, no matter how much time had passed.

Rather than such things, the problem he had at present was with the person who was looking his way, peeking at him from the shadows; that girl who shared the same characteristic blond hair as her mother was no other than Colette.

"Colette, Harold-sama is here. Come greet him."

"I-it's been a long time, Harold-sama...."

Colette talked nervously and bowed her head. It was his first meeting with her in five years, but as expected, she had grown to be so lovely that one could not help but call her a beauty. She had the same appearance that Harold knew from the game.

The last time Harold met her was at Delfit's fighting tournament. At the time, wanting Colette to become stronger, Harold riddled her with some slightly severe words, and it seemed like she was somewhat scared because of that.

"Colette, huh? You come here, too."

He made Colette sit down without giving her any chance to protest. The Ameller parent and child were now sitting at a small table, facing Harold. While trying the tea that Clara had given him with a "I don't know if it will suit your taste, but....", Harold once again started exposing the circumstances of the current matter.

"I heard that some thieves broke into the neighboring house last night, correct?"

"Yes."

"How many were they?"

"I heard they were two."

"Did anyone see them?"

"The Griffiths couple, who live in the house where the burglary happened,

and their son, Liner-kun. As far as I know, only the three of them saw the burglars, and the rumors say that they were concealing themselves with black robes."

"But your neighbors aren't here."

"The parents were attacked by the criminals and are in the hospital. As for Liner-kun, he went to chase after the burglars this afternoon and left the village....."

Harold compared all the facts that Clara knew with the information he had. It seemed like there was no big inconsistency. But naturally, she didn't know about the criminals' objective yet.

While feeling relieved, Harold turned his gaze towards Colette, who had been silent for quite some time.

"That Liner guy who chased after them, is he the one with the red hair?"

"Y-yes."

Having understood who Harold was referring to once he spoke of "red hair", Colette nodded her head, although her response showed she was still somewhat scared.

Thinking that was no good, Harold spoke words aimed at purposely making her anxious.

"If my expectations are right, then that guy is going to die."

Colette and Clara got their breaths taken away from them. As Harold expected, saying that so bluntly gave them a big shock.

However, this was not a harmless threat. If Liner were to take action by himself and to end up fighting against Ventus and Liliu, he would suffer a heavy defeat. Moreover, in this world, a defeat was most often equal to death, unlike the game where it just brought a "continue".

In order to avoid that, Harold had ordered Ventus and Liliu not to kill, but even so, what if some unforeseen accident were to occur during the combat? Therefore, if possible, Harold wanted Colette to quickly follow after Liner right now.

Hence, that's why he chose to urge Colette to move.

"Based on the eye-witnesses' reports, it is very likely that the criminals responsible for the robbery are the members of a thief group which has been making a fuss around the royal capital lately, 『Trinity』. The problematic part is that those guys tend to have high fighting abilities, and even if they're caught on the crime scene, they'll just force their way through and escape. "】

Of course, that was a downright lie. There was no such thief group. Harold just halfheartedly came up with that name and setting on the spot. Even in the game, that trio had no title, so Harold had to think of one himself. However, since they had no way to know about that, Colette and Clara's faces turned pale. Thanks to this, they did not even think of questioning Harold about why he was chasing after such dangerous people. If he could get them to keep ignoring that part, it would really help him.

"That's...."

As she thought of the possibility that she would lose Liner, Colette felt sad. She was regretting the fact that she did not force him to stop, and that feeling was clearly transmitted through the tone of her voice. However, Harold disregarded the pain in her heart and questioned her mother, Clara, once again.

"So, where did those guys escape to?"

"They went to the next town, towards the west...."

"Humph, then I guess I should go back to the royal capital for now and set things up."

"A-aren't you going after them?"

Just as planned, Colette was pulled by Harold's words. Colette likely wanted Harold to run after Liner and help him. Harold knew she did, but, after all, if he did that, Colette would end up not following Liner. On the other hand, taking Colette along with him would leave him with an extremely narrow timing to withdraw. Not doing it well could expose him as being the head of the criminal group.

"Not right now. Some preparations are needed to capture trinity."

"But, then, what about Liner?!"

"You want me to put myself in danger to rescue that guy? Is that what you want to fucking say?"

Harold's harsh words daringly crushed Colette's alternative of letting others deal with the problem.

"That's not what I...."

"Oh, I see, then what did you actually mean?"

"....."

Colette hanged her head in shame while biting her lip. It seemed like she had nothing to answer back with.

Moreover, in order to persuade her, Harold kept on talking.

"Those guys kill people just to steal from them, it's also guaranteed that their fighting power is the real deal, and you're telling me to go chase after them for your own damn convenience?"

"But.... still, you're strong so....."

"Yeah, certainly, I could win against them."

"Then-!"

"I told you, didn't I? They're a group. It's meaningless to capture one of them if the others manage to escape. In short, I'll need some more people backing me up if I'm to capture Trinity myself. And how could I guarantee those people's lives? If you can bear all the responsibilities for this, I'll go chase after the criminals right away."

"Giving a sound argument is not always the right thing to do" Harold was pretty sure someone somewhere had once said something along those lines, and he felt that it certainly applied to the current situation. Even if Harold's arguments were 100% correct, could crushing the wishes of an innocent young girl really be said to be the right choice?

No, to begin with, there was no sound argument that could justify his unreasonable behavior. But while he did think that, Harold still did not change his conduct.

"Stop acting like a spoiled child, Colette. Depending on someone and relying

on them is not the same thing."

"Huh....?"

"『I thought you had experienced for yourself how helpless it feels to be weak. But if you're still going to choose a weakling's way of life despite that, then suit yourself. 』"

Harold repeated the words he had said to Colette five years prior.

Relying on people was good in itself. Family and friends's relationships are structured around mutual reliance and support.

However, Colette was dependent on her surroundings. Not doing anything herself and just relying on her surroundings one-sidedly was completely wrong of her. For the past eight years, she had kept holding onto her worries and her fear of death without being able to speak of it to anyone, and yet, Harold, or rather, Kazuki Hirasawa, wanted to tell her to hang in there some more, like he did as he struggled through this world.

Well, that's awfully selfish of me, but still. He thought.

"I don't know if you remember those words, but is this the result you came to from being saved and surviving? Pathetic."

"-!"

The noise of a moving chair resounded. Unable to bear with Harold's rash remarks, Colette had shaken herself off from Clara, who tried to stop her, and ran out of the house. Harold wondered if the slight reflection of light within the dark came from her tears.

Silence fell in between Harold and Clara.

(..... Maybe I said too much.)

Harold's mouth already had an established reputation for always going too far. The current situation was what would happen when Harold, who had to put a stopper on himself by nature, got too passionate.

While drinking his black tea that had started to cool down, he was having cold sweat thinking about what to do. He had no more spare time to try anything. Even though he had asked Elu for a horse, if he didn't get out of Bloche village soon, he would be unable to arrive at the neighboring town before the break of dawn; in which case, Liner would get to the fog valley all by himself. Harold

intended to stealthily follow behind him for safety's sake, so he could not just linger here.

"Clara."

".....Yes?"

"If Colette tells you she's going to run after Liner, don't stop her."

"... Why? If the situation is as you described it, then as Colette's mother, it's impossible for me not to stop her, Harold-sama. “】

That was only natural.

However, Harold could not just nod and agree here. If his persuasion failed, he would have no choice but to get Elu to incite Colette to follow Liner, but even then, Clara would be the one to become a barrier to Harold's plans. Hence, that's why he said that to her.

"Humph, like mother like daughter, huh? You both haven't changed at all."

"What are you talking ab-....."

"I'm talking about how you always stupidly get caught in absolutely pointless worries."

"Don't tell me you... does that mean you intended to help that child from the beginning, Harold-sama....?"

He did not plan to say that much, but in order to keep things on the same track as the game's story, he intended to offer as much support as he possibly could from the shadows. Perhaps this was Colette's highest chance for survival. If Justus' plans were to succeed, most people would die, therefore, being a part of the protagonist's party that spared no efforts to obstruct those plans, Colette would surely be able to find a way to escape from the jaws of death.

"Our talk ends here. You already know this, but, you better not tell anyone that I came here."

With those parting words, Harold left the house.
There were three hours remaining until the break of dawn.



Even though spring had passed and the weather had gotten warmer, the night wind still pierced the skin a little. It was too much for Colette, who had promptly rushed out in light clothes.

However, she did not feel like going back to her house at all.

『Depending on someone and relying on them is not the same thing.』
『I thought you had experienced for yourself how helpless it feels to be weak. But if you're still going to choose a weakling's way of life despite that, then suit yourself. 』

Harold's biting words were still echoing in her mind. His way of speaking made her feel angry. The fact that she could not answer back to him made her feel vexed. But, the feeling that overtook the rest was shame, for she had not grown up at all. She had been so satisfied with the status quo that she had not paid attention to Harold's advice. She regretted all those days she had wasted doing nothing. As she wondered why things had turned out this way, Colette endured the tears that were welling up in her eyes while looking up at the starry sky.

Until the previous day, she had a modest life, however she was happy. She was with her dear mother, and with her close childhood friend, and she had no dissatisfaction or anxiety.

In the blink of an eye, that daily life had crumbled to pieces. All she was left with was her helpless self, and her regret from not being able to do anything. Maybe this was what Harold was concerned about five years before.

Powerless and aimless, Colette was just wandering about, walking tottering. The memories of the times she spent with Liner were flooding her from everywhere. So far, they had been common and ordinary to her, but it was not until this situation came to be that Colette understood how important those memories really were.

"Oh? Is that Colette?"

Suddenly, the night wind carried a voice to Colette's ears. From the sound's direction appeared Elu, with the exact same smile that he had during the day. Colette came to herself, and realized that she had walked all the way to the west gate of the village. She did not remember how she got there.

"What brings you here so late at night? And why are you so lightly dressed?"
(Elu)

Colette could not possibly say that she had run away due to her own foolishness being pointed out.

Since she didn't want to answer, she questioned Elu in return.

"Lots of things happened. What about you, Elu? What are you taking a horse for? Is something the matter"

"No, it's jut that some scary man came and woke me up earlier. He told me to sell him a new horse 'cause he had ridden his own horse to its death."

"A scary man?"

"Yeah. He was a man with red eyes, about as old as you are. He had a sharp glint in his eyes, and I just immediately sold him the horse without thinking."

From Elu's description of the "scary man"'s features, Colette knew who he was referring to. It was definitely Harold. And judging from his words and actions, it seemed like he had come to this village in a great hurry. Now, he was heading to the royal capital and....

"Huh?"

At that point, Colette noticed something odd. Why did Elu, who had sold the horse to Harold, not come from the east gate, which led to the royal capital, but came from the west gate, which led to the neighboring town?

"What's wrong?"(Elu)

Colette couldn't help but ask a question to Elu, who seemed puzzled.

"Say, Elu. Which way did the person you sold that horse to head to?"

"He went towards the west. Seemed like he was going to the neighboring town in a hurry. Maybe he had an emergency?"

But, why? That was the question and sentiment that swirled within Colette's mind.

Harold had said that he would be returning to the royal capital. He had said that chasing after Trinity would be dangerous, and that he would not be able to get any results from it.

So why did he head towards the neighboring town, that was in the complete opposite direction from the royal capital? Moreover, he was in such a hurry that he had woken up a peddler, who was sojourning in the village, in the middle of the night.

(Don't tell me, to help Liner he...?)

A convenient thought occurred to Colette. She believed there was no way that it was true since Harold had told her explicitly that he would not run after Liner.

But Colette did not have enough elements in hand to actually deny that thought of hers.

Moreover, at the same time, she recalled something. It was the story about the time Harold saved her and her mother, which Colette had heard many times from Clara.

He had lied to his parents, had sheltered Clara in the dungeon, and at the same time, he arranged a meticulous plan.

He also asked his father for a sword, and therefore received a large sum of money to go buy it, but he gave it to Clara and Colette instead, free of charge. Then, when his coachman told him that he would not be able to buy his sword without the money, Harold decisively said "Are you an idiot? Just choose whatever cheap sword you can find and buy it".

As a result of all this, he was despised as a murderer, but he accepted it and sacrificed himself so that people wouldn't know that Colette and her mother had survived.

"...I am really an idiot."

Colette knew that his kindness was not upfront. She knew that his severity was just the inside out of his kindness. She knew from her own experience that he was an extraordinarily gentle person. She was supposed to know that when he lied, it was to save others, even if it hurt him, and yet...

Hadn't he said that he would not chase after Liner? Then, why was he galloping his horse towards the opposite direction from the royal capital right

now?

Even the bad rumors about him were probably yet another thing that he just carried on his shoulders, because he was a man who would sully himself to help out someone else.

When Colette thought back upon it, even that one time was the same.

『I thought you had experienced for yourself how helpless it feels to be weak. But if you're still going to choose a weakling's way of life despite that, then suit yourself. 』

There was a continuation to those words. After saying that, Harold had added『I don't care, really. 』. Colette had memorized that part word for word. And now, she was realizing that it was not true.

(“I don't care, really”? That's a lie. Harold-sama has been caring for us for a long time....)

Although Harold had never personally visited her, Colette knew that a coachman would occasionally come to the village to examine the state of affairs there. It did not happen just once or twice, it was a regular occurrence. That man was most likely in charge of reporting to Harold about Colette and her mother's lifestyle.

Perhaps Harold had a bad feeling about their situation and was therefore worried. Maybe that was why he spoke such harsh words after meeting them again.

Colette was not able to notice that. On the contrary, although it was for just a moment, she had even felt angry at Harold for not helping Liner.

Colette was submerged by shame, embarrassment, and regret that were incomparable to what she had felt earlier.

While Harold was pushing himself so far, what was she doing? Getting depressed and cowering was pointless.

She had to help Liner, and to live up to Harold's expectations.

"—— I'm going after him."

Colette retraced her steps to the house so as to pick up some items she was going to need.

At that moment, her back was struck by Elu's voice.

"You want to chase after that scary man?"

"Yes."

"Isn't it kind of impossible to catch up to someone riding a horse by running on foot?"

That was a very pragmatic and correct judgment.

But it was nothing more than that. Even if she was being absurd and unreasonable, Colette no longer had a reason within her to stop her feet. She felt that, if she were to give up here, it would be the true end of something important.

"Even so, I'm going."

"Is that so? By the way, I'm just speaking to myself here, but that scary person was in too much of a hurry and gave me some extra money by mistake. Specifically, he gave me two horses' worth. So I pointlessly prepared one horse too many for him."

"Huh?"

"However, if I just go back as is with that amount of money on me, uncle might suspect that I've deceived a customer, so I'm keeping the remaining horse here. Somebody might end up taking it, but it can't be helped. Anyway, I made a good amount of money selling two of them so..."

Yes, yes, it can't be helped, it just can't be helped.

While repeating such words in a monotone way, Elu left towards the direction of the inn he was staying at. Colette, who was still in her pajamas, was left there all alone with a fast horse that was tied to a gatepost.

Colette lowered her head towards Elu who was in the process of leaving.

"Thank you, Elu."

"I don't have the slightest idea what you're thanking me for, but I will still gratefully accept your words, I guess."

Seeing Elu shrug his shoulders in an excessively unnatural way, Colette unintentionally let a giggle escape from her. The tied horse also let air out from his nostrils, as if it had understood the exchange between the two of them.

There were two hours remaining until dawn.

Chapter 82

Inside the rattling and shaking carriage, Elu seemed to be absent-minded. However, he was actually thinking about what could be the intentions behind Harold's actions, using the numerous information he had obtained thus far. Perhaps Harold's aim was to get Colette and Liner to attain back the sword that was stolen under Harrison's orders. Moreover, guessing from Harold's actions, it was very likely that Colette and Liner necessarily had to be together as a set. Otherwise, he probably would not have taken on so many troublesome measures.

At worst, he could have just given up on Colette, who was hesitating, and could have made someone from Frieri accompany Liner and act the part of being his comrade. However, from the beginning, Harold did not seem to have taken that option into account.

Was it necessary to have those two people together? Or was Colette, in particular, absolutely needed? Elu didn't know the answer, but he figured that both of these answers were close to the truth.

That idea was backed up by the words that Harold had said before. He knew that Colette and Liner were in the Bloche village. Furthermore, based on Colette and Harold's respective reactions, they definitely already knew each other. Perhaps Harold was even acquainted with Liner.

With all that, a certain question naturally came to Elu's mind. Did Harold get them to chase after him because he already knew them, or...

—— Did Harold get acquainted with them just so that he could get them to chase after him now?

Elu didn't know about Liner and Colette's circumstances, nor did he know about the relationship between them and Harold, so this was nothing more than a mere speculation.

Elu's personal subjective opinion told him that there was nothing special at all about Liner and Colette. They seemed like just a simple boy and girl from the countryside that could be found anywhere. That was the impression they had

given him.

However, in the end, that impression was overturned.

Elu didn't know what Colette was told by Harold. But, when she decided that she was going to run after Liner, there was a great sense of determination within her eyes. Though just for a brief moment, Elu was swallowed up by the assertive atmosphere emitted by her.

Elu had seen many great and valorous people, so he understood. That kind of atmosphere was held only by people with a hero's disposition, who had special, natural talents. There was no way something like that would come from any ordinary girl.

Therefore, Elu was thinking that there was something peculiar about Colette. Moreover, Harold likely knew that as well. Perhaps he had already known for a long time.

Elu had also been curious about Harold and Colette's past. Yet that past came out to light much more easily than Elu had expected.

The reason for that was simple; it was because the Bloche village was adjacent to the territory occupied by the Stokes household which Harold belonged to. As soon as Elu started investigating, using the Frieri personnel that wasn't busy and the Giffelt's information network, the answer to his question came to light. It was so easy that Elu wondered whether Harold really had any desire to conceal it. But anyway, the relationship between the two was clear; one had saved the other's life, therefore making him the other's benefactor.

Eight years prior, Harold had killed Clara and her daughter, who were his servants at the time, with his own hands..... That was what was said among the Stokes territory's populace. However, that was naturally not the truth. This was the case, since the mother and daughter are currently alive.

When Elu had said that the outfits of the burglars who broke into Liner's house made them seem quite similar to Harold, a scoundrel he had heard about from rumors, Colette had strongly denied it, saying that he was not such a person. Then she tried to take back her words, claiming she didn't know him. Moreover, the expression she had immediately after that, showed that she had made a blunder. Thus, from all this, Elu could infer that Colette was in a position where she had to conceal the fact that Harold had saved her.

Harold had probably strictly ordered her to do so. Due to this, Harold was made to burden himself with the infamy of being a murderer. Perhaps this could be said to be the starting point of the many bad rumors concerning him. Furthermore, there was no evidence that Harold had ever denied the false gossips. That man, with his massive pride, had probably accepted the unreasonable false charges so as to keep the survival of the mother and daughter a secret, no matter what it took. He likely did that to allow them to escape from the Stokes territory, to a place of his choosing where nobody knew them.

Elu could think of several other reasons for what Harold had done, but his attention was focused on what came afterwards, in the mother and daughter's lives.

They were a fatherless family with only females. At that time, Clara's life was saved but she had lost her job and Colette was still a nine-year-old child who could not work. Economically, they should have been in quite a distress. However, currently, although they had modest lives, they were not living in poverty. Though it was just a small bungalow, they were still properly living in their own, bought, detached house. Indeed, their house was not rented, they had bought it. Moreover, it was with a single payment, immediately after they came to this village.

Had Clara been her employer's exclusive attendant, this would be another story; however, the earnings of an underservant like her were insignificant. She could not really have been said to be scraping by, but it would have been extremely difficult for her to purchase her own detached house with a single payment by just using her personal savings.

So, where did those two get the funds to buy the house? It was pretty clear that Harold was deeply involved with the situation.

In short, Harold likely had saved Colette and Clara's lives, and, while shouldering the false charges of murder, had given them enough capital that they would not have trouble making ends meet. Helping others by sacrificing himself, that behavior was worlds apart from his usual impudence.

No matter what Harold's real intent was, for him, helping Colette and Clara was worth it.

If that was because Harold had already seen through Colette's natural talents at the time, then...

As Elu's thoughts arrived there, he felt shivers running down his spine. When he was ten years old, Harold had estimated what was going to happen eight years later, and had therefore helped Clara and Colette in preparation for the current situation; that was the absurd supposition that crossed Elu's mind. No matter what, Harold could not just make people and things move as he wished. However, considering Harold's behavior, Elu could not deny that supposition. The reason he thought that was because this was not the only time that Harold had seen too far ahead in the future when taking action.

When Elu thought back upon it, there were other suspicious parts in Harold's history. The most conspicuous one was in the Beltiz forest's battle. The Sarian Empire had crossed the mountains and penetrated into the Liber kingdom's territory, causing a tragedy that combined a total of over 100 casualties from both the knight order and the local citizens, who were the stellar tribe. In that battle, Harold was put under suspicion of being a spy and had been imprisoned.

As for why he was suspected, it was because he was dressed in the service uniform of an enemy nation, the Sarian Empire.

However, though this information was not made public, during the Beltiz forest's battle, Harold brought down a major general of the empire's army, Ritzert, the magician. If Harold really was a spy of the imperial army, there was no way he would have done that.

So, if for argument's sake Harold was not a spy of the empire, then maybe he had actually disguised himself as the empire's troops so as to make the knight order clearly aware of who their enemy was in the battle. In fact, according to Cody, who was Harold's superior officer in the knight order, Harold's actions had played a major role in limiting the damages on the order's troops.

Then, what if, from the beginning, Harold's purpose in disguising in the imperial army's uniform was to cause a disturbance in the battlefield and to defeat Ritzert?

That would mean Harold had perceived the imperial army's raid before it had even happened. Ordinarily, Elu would just be surprised and think "He has one

great information network”. However, Harold was not ordinary. Moreover, in order to accomplish all this, he had to accomplish the precondition of belonging to the knight order.

What had to be kept in mind here was that Harold was under the established age limit for joining the knight order at the time; he was barely 13 years old, which made him the youngest person to ever come knocking on the order’s doors. This situation could not have happened unless there was a clear intention behind Harold’s actions.

If all along his purpose in joining the knight order was to participate in the battle of Beltiz forest, then just when had Harold started preparing himself? No matter how talented he was, it would have taken him more than a year or two in order to acquire the ability to join the knight order at the age of 13. In other words, he might have known for years that the battle was going to happen. Furthermore, before the moment of the attack, there were absolutely no signs that the battle would occur.

”... Yeah, as if. I guess I’m thinking too much after all.”

Elu unintentionally let these words come out in response to his own thoughts. If his absurd hypothesis were true, then this would no longer be on the scale of what excellent planning and a superior intelligence network could do.

“So, it’s impossible”, though the murmur with subtle meanings escaped from Elu, his tone of voice was so thin that even he was surprised.

That was because Elu’s biggest questions regarding Harold still remained.

The first question was how could Harold confidently declare that Elu was Giffelt while he had not given him any information? Elu had his doubts about this, but he could still somehow understand the situation if he had been tricked into revealing himself by some leading question.

However, thinking about it normally, it should have been impossible for Harold to hit on the truth after a day or two from the very few conversations he had with Elu.

The other question Elu had was about Harold’s knowledge concerning the star memory. While it connected the lives of many clans, those who were given the name “Giffelt” had been pursuing it for several hundreds of years; this star was “something” that contained all things of nature within. What it might look like,

or even what it might be, was completely unknown. The star was the truth of this world.

It was no exaggeration to say that the Giffelt organization was formed for the sake of obtaining the star memory. Yet Harold knew of its existence all along and perhaps he even knew where it was located.

But if Harold did know, then that would mean he knew much more than he should.

About Giffelt, the star memory, the occurrence of that unpredictable battle, about how Harrison was going to order him to collect treasures, including that treasured sword; and perhaps, there were even more things that were awaiting in the future.

In view of how Colette's actions this time had not met with Harold's assumptions, and based on how he was struggling to deal with Justus, one could assume that that ability of his was by no means perfect. It was likely limited. However, even if it was limited, it was still possible that Harold had it.

"The power to see the future — — Precognition."

In his own carriage, Elu finally said the words. If he were to say that to someone, he would likely be scornfully laughed at. If he was told that this was just a forced and distorted reasoning he made, so as to find an explanation to the situation, then Elu would not be able to show any proof of the contrary.

However, the more he knew about Harold's actions, the more he became unable to deny this theory of his. Moreover, he just could not help himself from thinking like this.

Thus, he wondered; if his idea was correct, then how far ahead in the future could Harold see? What was he trying to accomplish with that power?

Chapter 83

(Liner's pov)

"Damn it, I can't see ahead...!"

Unable to see even a few meters ahead, Liner cursed at the poor view that was hindered by both the night's darkness and thick fog.

The previous day, he had dashed out from Bloche village around noon and had taken almost no breaks till he entered the fog valley. As for why he went there, it was due to a conversation he had overheard from two men who were sitting next to each other at a diner that Liner had gone to, due to having felt some hunger on the way.

『What was the deal with those suspicious people dressed all in black earlier?』
『Who knows? Still, they were going to pass through the fog valley apparently, that's quite unusual at this time of the day. 』

Suspicious people dressed all in black. Upon hearing those keywords, Liner gave up on his meal, and as if flaring up at them, he forcefully asked the two men about those people.

Maybe due to how forcefully Liner asked them, the men were slightly shaken, but they still did answer his questions.

About an hour prior, just before sunset, they had seen two people dressed in black robes enter the fog valley; that was all the two men had to say. The fog valley, as its name implied, was a valley shrouded by fog. There, even in the middle of the day, one's field of vision would be limited to a few meters ahead. Obviously, after sunset, the valley was dominated by a complete darkness that even the light of the moon could not penetrate through, regardless of any fog. Moreover, it was a rocky peak which made it difficult to walk through. No one would ever go there at night.

After hearing that story, Liner immediately dashed out of the diner. Of course, he was heading towards the fog valley.

He had no solid proof, but, given the situation and timing of it happening, it was

highly likely that those two people were the criminals Liner was looking for. Thus, Liner recklessly rushed ahead and managed to turn up at the fog valley as the night's veil of darkness was coming down, but due to the bad field of vision he had and the uneven ground, this was going to take him some time whether he liked it or not. With that, by the time the sun started to rise, Liner's legs were slowing down due to the accumulated fatigue that came from having kept walking all throughout the night.

Feeling naturally tired, Liner sat down on a nearby rock to catch his breath.

While repeatedly taking deep breaths, Liner was thinking about just how long it would take him to catch up to the criminals.

Based on the talk Liner had with the two men in the diner, the pair of criminals had entered the fog valley one or two hours before him. So he had thought that if he hurried ahead and didn't take any breaks, he would immediately catch up to them, yet even though he had been walking without any rest so far, he had not gotten a glimpse of anyone.

Therefore, Liner decided to lay down on the rock that was under him. If he did not get a small break soon, he would have no stamina left.

This was a very peaceful place; aside from Liner's own disturbed respiration and heartbeat, there were no sounds to be heard.

As he inhaled the clear air of the early morning, Liner's heart gradually calmed down. That was not limited to his heartbeat and respiration, for it also included some of his emotions, such as his anger and anxiety.

By no means did he start feeling like forgiving the people who stole the sword from him. However, he felt that the impatience he had been holding onto for a while had now declined, to some extent.

(Right, I don't have to be impatient. I am definitely getting closer to them.)

Liner would sometimes be warned by his parents during his usual fencing training sessions about how he let the blood rush to his head too easily. It was a bad habit that made him concentrate on one thing and ignore everything else around him. Though it was not a bad thing in a fair, one-on-one battle, it could make him expose a fatal gap in his defense when taking on multiple opponents at once.

Hence why his parents had instructed him to broaden his field of view, and for

that purpose they were always telling him, over and over again, to keep his mind steady.

Clearly, keeping control over the mind was not a good field for Liner. However, that also meant that if he could overcome this weakness, he would be able to become stronger.

That was what Liner believed, therefore, whenever he felt his mind was excited or in disorder, he would engage in a spiritual training that he was not fond of, so as to calm his mind by his own will in order to be able to fight without any sort of hesitation weighing on his spirit.

Liner believed this was the right attitude to have. However, by nature, human beings had fortes and weak points, and one could not overcome them so easily. Suddenly, Liner noticed his consciousness returning. This implied that, before he came to, his consciousness had actually faded away.

Liner felt like the sun was quite high up. He could not see the sky as it was obstructed by the thick fog, but he could still roughly tell the sun's position thanks to the glimpses of light that somehow pierced through the fog. The sun, which was supposed to have merely started its rise a little while ago, was much higher than it should.

".... this is bad! I fell asleep for a moment there!"

This was largely due to the fatigue Liner had accumulated. The clear air was not free of guilt either, as it lured Liner to sleep and allowed him to ignore the lack of comfort of his rocky bed.

However, the biggest reason was Liner's total lack of control over his mind which got him to doze off whenever he tried too hard to calm down. Still, given how he was able to fall asleep in his current situation, it could at least not be denied that he had nerves of steel.

Liner jumped up with great vigor from his sleeping spot. Though he did not have any sense of time, from the surrounding air, he guessed, wishfully, that it was still around the early morning.

I've probably been asleep for only a few dozen minutes, and at the very worst, it shouldn't have been more than an hour, right? Liner wondered. At any rate, he had taken an unexpectedly long break. It would have been bad if he didn't get back to his pursuit immediately.

While seriously reflecting on his mistakes, Liner quickened his pace. Still, he felt like his unexpected overstay was not a bad thing at all, even though this was just an after-thought. His body had rested for a moderate time, and although the night had already come to an end, it was still dim at that time, so his eyes had to get used to the darkness for him to be able to traverse the valley. But now, the sun had completely risen, and the only hindrance left was the thick fog, which made Liner feel like it was easy to walk forward. Actually, his field of view was still pretty narrow, but as it became brighter, he could rely on his sight more and more.

Then, a little while after resuming his pursuit, Liner finally found the people he was looking for.

He suppressed his impulse of dashing at them immediately, and he hid behind a rock to observe the situation. The fog was still pretty dense, but by concentrating his eyes, Liner managed to confirm that those people were a duo. However, he didn't know whether they had the box that contained his treasured sword or not.

While being careful not to make any sound with his feet, Liner reduced the distance between him and the two people.

As for them, they did not show any signs of movement. They did not seem to be talking to each other either. Perhaps they were taking a break, just like Liner did.

(In that case, I might be able to take them by surprise and take back what's mine.)

Liner concealedly adjusted his breathing. Then, the moment the state of his body and mind coincided, he rushed out of his hiding spot without any hesitation.

He immediately dashed at a speed that made him unable to feel the rocky ground beneath his feet. When there were only a few meters remaining between him and the enemies, they finally sensed his presence and started moving.

One of them was wielding a long spear, there was no mistaking that. Liner accelerated his pace even more.

He had the opportunity to make the first move.

(I've got to crush the distance between us and get close to the enemy with the long-ranged weapon!)

Liner faithfully applied his parents' teachings and moved to attack at a distance from which the man with the spear could not use his weapon properly. However, this was no ordinary opponent; he completely parried Liner's surprise attack that could not be said to be perfect. He had used the solid shaft of his spear to catch the slash of Liner's sword.

If Liner were to stop his attack here, he would be defeated. The battle from that night had been burned in Liner's eyes, and he knew that the abilities of his current opponents were above his own. Moreover, they had the advantage in numbers.

Liner's only real chance of winning was to settle things before the enemies could make use of their superior abilities. Hence, he went with a surprise attack.

Liner put all his weight into his sword so as to cut into the shaft of the enemy's spear. The spear-wielder stayed his feet without warding off Liner's power, and he changed his stance to face Liner in a contest of strength. What Liner did was only natural. There was one other enemy to worry about, and if Liner could just take advantage of these few seconds, he would get to attack said enemy while he was still defenseless. But before that, Liner had to render the spear wielder powerless.

Liner kept putting strength into his sword, and with his right leg, he kicked the spearhandle as hard as he could.

The spear suffered damage from Liner's strength and from the spear wielder's strength that came to counter it from the other side. Then, Liner's kick had also struck there. As great force was accumulated on both of its sides, the spear broke in half.

Perhaps because he had not imagined this situation would happen, the opponent's body was stiff. Liner did not overlook that chance, and he kept the uninterrupted flow of his right leg's kick going right up to the man's face. The kick had lost almost all of its strength when it hit the spear. Liner could not expect any damages to be made.

However, the man who was kicked had slid his body to Liner's left. Liner, on the other hand, fled to the right, to separate himself from the man. This was also

aimed at taking some distance from the dual-sword wielder who was approaching from the left as well. The spear wielder staggered, and the speed of the dual-sword wielder was somewhat lowered as he had to change the direction he was heading at. So, he took a detour and charged once again. This made the dual-sword wielder lose maybe less than a second. However, that was enough for Liner to prepare himself.

”Dragon fire, Hiryu!”

A crimson dragon manifested itself from the sword that Liner was wielding. It was a high temperature flame in the shape of a dragon, and it swallowed the dual-sword wielder whole.... or rather, that’s what seemed to have happened.

”As expected, it’s not going to be that easy...”

Jump; that was all the opponent did. However, that alone was enough for the dual-sword wielder to avoid the Dragon Fire at the last moment.

That dual-sword wielder was faster than Liner and could use many elaborate moves, too. Were he to approach, it would become almost impossible for Liner to defend himself.

Therefore, Liner did not let the opponent come near him, and he was fighting him from a distance. That was also why Liner had used the longest ranged attack that he could currently use. The truth was that, if possible, Liner had wanted to corner the enemy and to make him unable to fight with that blow.

In a fight, accounting for one’s distance from the enemy was extremely important. If someone fought at a distance that fit him, it could allow him to overcome a difference in abilities and it could be a deciding factor between victory and defeat in a battle.

Therefore, in order to crush all his opponents, Liner was trying to erase the advantages that both the spear wielder and the dual-sword wielder respectively had.

However, the reality did not fit Liner’s expectations. The opponent was able to avoid his dragon fire, and was now ready to retaliate.

He had made the other opponent’s spear unusable, but even so, if he was attacked head-on by the dual-sword wielder all by himself, it would still be a heavy load to bear for Liner.

Moreover, even now, the stolen sword was still in the hands of the enemies. It was impossible to win for Liner.

But those chilling thoughts were drowned on the spot by him, who had a disproportionate smile on his face.

He recalled a day from five years ago. On that day, he suffered a complete defeat for the very first time in his life, excluding the bouts he had with his parents, it was someone close to his age at that.

He was extremely vexed. Thus, he had promised himself that he would absolutely get his revenge some day.

Since then, catching up to him, to his rival Harold, had always been Liner's objective.

"Compared to Harold, this guy's speed is pretty slow! "

In his fight with him five years ago, Liner had witnessed a much faster speed from Harold. Harold was also stronger than the dual-sword wielder.

In his mind, Liner pictured the image of Harold, the man he was constantly chasing after.

His next objective after this was to gain victory against Harold. So as to be on par with him, who was his rival and friend.

"Am I going to be defeated here? Harold is going to ridicule me if that happens!"

Five years had passed, and Harold had surely become stronger. *How am I ever going to win against Harold if I can not defeat the enemy in front of me?*

Thought Liner, so as to encourage himself.

That was enough for Liner's power to surge from deep within his body.

He was going to win, and get back his sword.

With such intentions in his eyes, Liner fearlessly confronted the opponent that was blocking the way in front of him. For now, he took a small breath, and shouted.

"Let's go!"

Liner's shout resounded all throughout the valley that was covered in a thick fog.

Chapter 84

As he watched the violent fight unfold, Harold was drilling his feet to the ground as they seemed like they were somehow going to rush out. “Still not here, huh?” Thought Harold impatiently, as he prayed for Liner’s safety while wishing he would be able to hold on a little longer.

It had been five years since Harold had last seen Liner fight, but in his present condition, Liner was still one step behind Lilium and Ventus. Rather, it was better to say that Liner was already doing well for being able to take on the two of them so far.

Even so, he could not win. The difference in ability between Liner and his opponents was gradually becoming clearer. The reason Liner was somehow able to hold on was because both of his opponents had a short reach, due to Lilium’s fighting style, and to Ventus’ spear being broken.

Perhaps having seen that he could not win in close combat, he was focusing mostly on long-range attacks. This was a fancy way of fighting that could not have been expected from the reckless Liner of the game’s story. Harold knew that Liner was currently giving his everything.

However, Liner could not do anything more than that. It was possible for him to fight a good fight, but victory was out of his reach. He might have been the protagonist of the original story, but if he was too lacking, if he was too weak, then defeat was still the inevitable conclusion for him.

However, conversely, if his lack of ability could be dealt with, if he were strong enough, then he would be able to win; and Harold knew exactly what Liner needed for that.

That was why he had led her here. The piece that would help usher Liner to victory.

(Right on time!)

As if cutting through the heavy fog, she — Colette appeared and went to

confront Lilium with perfect timing. Having confirmed that, Harold, who was still in hiding, tightly clenched his right hand.



When Liner thought he was done for, a voice that should not have been here reached his ears.

"Yaaah!"

He heard a yell, a whoosh, and the sound of a metallic clank. It took Liner some time to understand what had happened.

Then, when he got a grasp on the situation, what followed was a feeling of astonishment.

"Colette?! Why are you...."

"Liner, I came to help!"

With a pair of tonfas on both of her arms, Colette had taken a stance in front of the duo of criminals without any sign of hesitation. From behind Colette, Liner could feel an overflowing determination that he had never seen before. Apparently, using her tonfas, Colette had repelled the twin swords that were coming for Liner. While the opponents had taken barely any damage, they seemed to be vigilant due to Colette's sudden appearance.

Using that chance, Liner started talking.

"You came to help? But I thought you were afraid."

"Yes, I was. And I still am."

"Then..."

"But even more than that, I don't want to lose you, Liner. So, even though I'm scared, I've decided to fight."

Though Colette's voice was trembling a little, Liner could not feel any hesitation in her words.

"Liner, you said you'd protect me, right?"

".....yeah." (*Liner*)

What Colette was referring to was the promise Liner had made to her when

the two of them had just met. When Liner had just met her, Colette was afraid of strangers, was very bad at making friends, and was always frightened by something or the other. Liner could not stand seeing her like that, and had therefore made that promise to cheer her up.

Yet, currently, Liner was the one who was being protected. That situation made him feel embarrassed and ashamed, hence why he had a hard time enunciating his short answer.

"I've been depending too much on that promise. I knew you'd take care of protecting me if you were there, and I didn't think of doing it myself... I'm sorry, Liner." (Colette)

Colette's voice was still trembling, maybe out of fear of the enemies in front of her, or maybe it was out of regret from her past behavior. Even so, in a loud voice, she made an oath.

"Therefore, I'll also protect you, Liner. Say goodbye to the old me who only depended on others!"

Seeing her like that, Liner was bewildered, he wondered if this was really Colette.

Though she often showed a firm side to her when she warned Liner regarding his rash behavior, the real cause behind that was actually fear, a fear that came from wanting to avoid any reckless actions being taken. Colette had a personality that did not think well of change and danger.

Liner did not know the reason for that, but he figured it might have been related to the bygone days when she was young and had moved to the village after her life was put in danger.

She hoped to keep the peaceful status quo and she would always completely keep away from any sign of turbulence or danger. That was the girl called Colette that Liner knew.

Yet, she was now standing before the enemies, with weapons in her hands. Just like she had said, she was trying to protect Liner.

However, looking closely, her body was faintly shaking.

It's only natural, thought Liner. Colette had also been taught how to fight alongside Liner by Liner's parents for the sake of self-defense. She was praised as being quite talented, and indeed, she was certainly not lacking in talent and

power. After Liner, she was likely the strongest person in the village.

However, her being able to show those capabilities in a real battle was another story. While Colette would show considerable strength in training and in friendly bouts, when it came to fighting monsters, her strength would decline and she would find herself unable to attack properly. Liner's mother, Leona, had said that Colette's fear of fighting, getting wounds or dying was acting as a limiter on her movements.

She was that fainthearted, and she could not possibly be unafraid of facing an enemy stronger than herself. Nevertheless, she had pushed her fear away and had come this far just to save Liner.

Power circulated everywhere through Liner's body. He motivated himself by telling himself that he would not be a man if he did not stand up in this situation.

"..... Then, I'll leave my back to you."

"Yes"

"And I'll be protecting your back too!"

Liner was still at a disadvantage in the battle.

However, strangely, just because Colette was next to him, he did not feel like losing at all. An uplifting sensation he hadn't felt in a long time was welling up within him. The last time this happened was in his fight against Harold in the tournament.

With fleeting sidelong glances, Liner and Colette confirmed each other's presence and nodded silently. Using that as a signal, Liner was the first one to dash ahead.

"Dragon fire, Hiryu!"

He once again fired a dragon-shaped flame. However, his attack was different from the one earlier for it was not aimed at the enemies.

He had aimed at the space between the two opponents. His fire dragon attacked right in the middle of said space. The criminals both evaded the attack, the dual sword wielder to the left, and the spear wielder to the right. Liner's aim was to push them away from each other like so.

Not missing that chance, Colette and Liner went right after the dual-sword

wielder, in a straight line.

The spear wielder's weapon was broken and he was burdened with the task of carrying the stolen sword. As for the dual-wielder, he could still fight perfectly fine. Normally, one would likely aim for the former rather than the latter. But what Liner was thinking was that, if he and Colette could defeat the dual sword wielder, then it would be their win.

Looking only at the numbers, both sides were an equal match, with two people against two. However, both of the enemies were stronger than Colette and Liner, so attacking them directly would most likely only lead to defeat. But by turning the situation into a two against one, they would be able to defeat the dual sword wielder first. Then, only the spear wielder would remain, he did have some power but his weapon was broken and his speed was inferior to Liner's. So, in that turn of events, Liner would have a higher chance to take back his sword.

"Ha!"

Liner's sword flashed ahead in an attempt to hit the enemy right from the front. The opponent took a step back to dodge, but immediately after, Colette passed by Liner, approached closer while rotating on herself to raise her own speed, and swung her tonfas at that dual-sword wielder.

A shrill noise resounded. As they met with the enemy's two swords, Colette's tonfas were blocked.

However, in doing so, the dual sword wielder's body was sent flying away. This was because, in addition to the attack's power, the dual sword wielder had leaped behind to kill the attack's momentum, having assessed that his weapons would be destroyed if he were to take that blow up-front.

While he was still in the air, the enemy could not possibly make use of his superior speed. To be done with the enemy's evading tactics once and for all, Liner made use of his strongest attack, which he took pride in.

"Heaven's roar, Ten Shou Hoko!"

The sword was swung at such a speed that it left an afterimage. Though the dual-sword wielders' weapons were smashed up as a result, the real value of this attack came after.

The sword's high-speed swing generated a shock wave akin to an actual roar

that attacked the opponent. Unable to resist, the enemy was pushed back by the pressure, to then be blown away. At the end of his short flight, he hit his back on a rock and collapsed on the spot.

It seemed like he had passed out and it was unlikely that he would be getting back into the fight any time soon.

”Careful, Liner!”

However, Liner had no time to take a breath of relief as Colette warned him with a sharp voice. A broken spear’s violent thrust was coming at him from behind.

With that speed, Liner instinctively realized that he could not avoid the attack. Moreover, he had a hard time figuring out the right timing to. That was when Colette came in.

Using her tonfas, she repelled the spike from the side and slightly deflected its trajectory. Together with a thunderous sound, the spike grazed Liner’s ear. However, without flinching from that attack, Liner took a step ahead to shorten the distance and took on the rear of the spear wielder.

”I’ll be taking this back!”

Due to the speed of his thrust which was evaded, the spear wielder’s balance was destroyed. Then, Liner took the box of his treasured sword which was hanging on the man’s back.

He felt its heavy weight in his hands. This was the proof that his parents, who were very strict when it came to swordsmanship, had acknowledged his growth. For Liner, that symbolic meaning was more important than the sword itself, and he could not surrender it.

That’s the reason why he absolutely wanted to get the sword back. Thus, the moment he recovered the sword, he was fatally careless.

The weight in his hands suddenly disappeared. It was too abrupt, so much so that Liner could not immediately understand what had just happened. He thought he had dropped it, but that was not it. He had not felt it fall, nor had he heard the sound of it dropping down.

Moreover, from behind him, he felt the pressure from someone who had not been here up to now as far as he knew.

Liner instantly turned his head around. There, was someone who was

concealing his face and was dressed in a black robe similar to the robes of the spear wielder and dual sword user from before. No matter how one looked at him, that person seemed like the enemies' comrade, and in his hands was the sword that Liner had taken back just some time ago.

"Who, who are you? Give that back!"

"....."

Although Liner took a stance and threatened him with his sword, the other party did not show any reaction. Rather, the man passed the sword to the spear wielder as if he had not heard anything. Thereupon, the spear wielder threw away his weapon, he carried the sword's box and the dual-sword wielder who could still not move, and he escaped, vanishing within the valley's thick fog.

"Wait!"

Though Liner tried to chase after him, the third opponent was still standing in his and Colette's way.

That same opponent slowly drew a sword that was sheathed by his waist, as if to show it off. It was a plain long sword that could likely be bought from any weapon shop.

However, to the two people facing him, the sword appeared like an extremely wicked and dangerous weapon. Liner realized that this was not due to the long sword but to the one holding it.

Without having to fight the duo, he had made them understand that he was on a whole other level. Not to mention Colette and Liner, even the two criminals they had been fighting earlier could not compare to the pressure released by the long-sword wielder.

(Can we win against him...?)

Liner could still feel that uplifting sensation from earlier in his body. However, even with that, he could not picture himself winning against the long-sword wielder at all.

Liner had sweat flowing out from his whole body, and at the moment he and Colette were pressured to the point of losing their nerves... The long sword wielder was already standing behind the two of them.

"Wha...!"

While they did not understand why he had done that, the duo promptly took some distance away from him.

However, even though their defense was full of gaps, the long sword wielder did not go after them to attack them, nor had he made any moves against their exposed backs before. It seemed like he was telling them that he could easily kill them whenever he wanted.

Such a difference in ability was not something that could easily be overcome. Liner could somehow bear with this using his fighting spirit which had almost ran out, but even so, feeling that his life was in a real crisis for the first time, he could not get his body to move as he wanted.

If he chose to survive, Liner would likely have no choice other than to escape. However, that would mean giving up on the sword, moreover, there was no guarantee that he would be able to run away either. Therefore, he made a bitter decision.

"Colette, you have to run away."

"What?! What about you?!"

"I'll keep him busy."

Liner had judged that the very best scenario would be if he managed to allow Colette to escape by herself. The problem was, how long would he be able to hold onto that opponent's attention and delay him?

"I can't just leave you!"

"It's fine, just run away already!"

"No!"

While the two friends quarreled, the long sword wielder who had been carefully watching the situation finally made a move.

His body soared into the air like it was being pulled by strings as he jumped backwards. Then, he got down on top of a rock, and he disappeared once again. Thinking he was behind them again, the duo simultaneously looked over their shoulders, but there were no signs of the enemy there. As the two were getting perplexed over the enemy's position, they started hearing several, consecutive

noises of falling stones in their surroundings. The sounds showed no signs of settling down; rather, as they kept repeating over and over again, the intervals between them were getting shorter.

The visibility was certainly bad due to the thick fog, however, even if not for that, the enemy's speed would still be too fast for Liner and Colette to follow with their eyes.

Indeed, this was just like the time Liner had fought against Harold.

For a moment, a thought crossed Liner's mind. However, he immediately denied it.

There were no logical grounds for this denial. His judgement was simply based on emotions as he told himself that Harold would never do such a thing.

While that inner conflict occurred within Liner's mind, he had completely lost sight of the man wielding the long sword. Then, the sound he had been continuously hearing stopped.

What replaced that sound was silence, a silence where even Liner's own heartbeat felt like an obstruction. Liner and Colette concentrated all their senses in searching for any presence in their surroundings.

For dozens of seconds, it was overwhelmingly quiet.

But that calm was broken by the low sound of an impact that came from behind Liner. Out of a conditioned reflex, Liner and Colette looked behind toward that. Or rather, they had made the mistake of looking behind.

The origin of that sound was a pebble. It had likely collided with a rock as it feebly rolled towards Liner's feet.

The moment Liner figured out he had just been caught, something else approached his back. But this time, it was a sign of death. While feeling regret, Liner prepared himself to die.

Then, when it seemed like the sword was going to attack Liner and cut his life short, a sharp sound assaulted his ear as he heard a low groan, and——

"Know your place, small fish."

Liner heard a certain voice. The voice had a lower tone than in his memory, but it still felt nostalgic.

He did not understand what had happened as he could only look at the back of the man who was standing before him and Colette to protect them.

The man was taller than Liner, at a height of about 180 centimeters (5'11"). He had black hair that was clearly visible within the white fog and he was holding two swords in both of his hands.

"How dare the likes of you get in my damn way!"

But the most distinguishing feature above all was those sharp words that looked down on others from far too high.

It had been a long time since that day, and Liner had been continuously chasing after him for just as long. This was the back of Liner's friend, rival, and objective.

Chapter 85

"Ha, Harold...?"

From behind, Liner said Harold's name in blank surprise. He had grown as tall as Colette, and his fearless countenance was now similar to the Liner that Harold knew from the original game.

However, even though his name was called, Harold did not have any room to respond.

The current situation was considerably delicate. He had to make the black robed man in front of him leave as quickly as possible.

He, who had attacked Liner earlier, was not devoid of emotions like Ventus and Lilium, nor was he sent by Justus. He was a member of Frieri.

Back in Bloche village, Harold had asked two things of Elu. One was to station two people to guide Liner towards the fog valley after he reached the town. The other was to prepare a black-robed dummy.

The reason behind his first request went without saying. The second was that, because Colette's actions did not correspond to his plans, Harold had to make an appearance in front of her. To agitate her, Harold had said that he would not be helping, but had he really not helped, it would have given Colette a bad impression of him.

In order for Harold to openly rescue her and Liner, he absolutely needed a substitute for himself. So, he chose someone from Frieri. Using him, Harold had to allow Ventus and Lilium to withdraw no matter what.

He was worried that, if not for this, Liner and Colette would end up following them all the way to Harrison's place; and rushing into such a mid-game event from the very beginning of their story would certainly lead the two friends to their defeat. Anyway, if Harold were to just let things proceed as they did in the original story, the treasured sword would eventually get back to Liner.

Moreover, since it would be troublesome if the man from Frieri were to be slandered as a criminal by the authorities and the knight order due to Colette and Liner, Harold had to promptly bring this case to a close, somehow or other.

However, he could not slay an innocent person, so it had been decided in a previous meeting that he would defeat him with his bare hands.

That did not mean he would really hit the man, he would just make it look as if he did. Hence, the man put on an act, pretending to be staggering. Since he could not match Harold's speed, he made it look like he had taken some damage before.

This way, it would not seem too suspicious even if he was easily knocked down by Harold's bare hands.

The man weakly took a stance with his sword. That put Liner and Colette on alert, but Harold talked to him with an air of composure.

"How unsightly. I have no need to draw my sword against the likes of you."

In reality, that line was rather made to be heard by Colette and Liner. After ascertaining that the two of them had heard him properly, Harold made his move.

This was quite easy for him. He took an extremely fast step forward to cover the distance separating him from the man, and he drove his fist into the other party's abdomen... Or rather, he pretended to do so.

Thankfully, the man was wearing a robe that was too baggy for one to figure the outline of his body, so it was not possible to visually confirm that Harold's fist had stopped right before hitting him. All that was left was for the man to bend his body as if taking on the hit's impact, and to drop his sword while falling down.

As Liner looked at him fall, his face turned stiff.

"O-one blow...?"

Harold could understand Liner's feelings, he had had an extremely difficult face-off against that opponent and yet he had been brought down this easily. Well, that whole display was just an act though.

Leaving Liner alone for the time being, Harold cracked his fingers. Thereupon, a group of men appeared out of nowhere. They were from Frieri.

"Take that man."

"Understood."

Having received Harold's instructions, they started restraining the fallen man.

Harold figured that this would serve to ease Liner and Colette's worry. Then, after confirming that the job was done, he finally faced the two friends.

"Looks like you've had a hard time."

"Oh, shut up... But still, you saved us. Thank you!"

"Humph."

As usual, Liner was too straightforward, the shine in his eyes seemed painful to Harold who moved about for his own self-interests and who was always scheming this and that.

He unintentionally turned his eyes away, and there, was Colette's face. She had a big smile on her face, an earth-shattering smile. It looked like Harold had not left a bad impression on her, which was nice, but her attitude was troubling. He decided to pretend not to notice.

Then, at just the right timing, his men's voice reached his ears.

"The target has been taken, sir."

Perhaps because they had lived through some brutal circumstances as mercenaries, their wording was generally rough. However, that did not mean they treated their employer, Harold, with contempt. Given the right amount of money, they would have no complaint about acting in a cheap play like this one, or even about working like utility men in town.

In short, they were workers, tied to Harold by money, in a give and take relationship.

Conversely, that meant that if Harold ever became short of money, his connection with them would break. But at the present, he had enough funds to say that there was no need for him to worry about such things.

"Transport him to the town and interrogate him."

"Understood. Hurry and carry him, maggots!"

The three men carried their fallen, restrained comrade, and disappeared towards the town. After watching that scene, Liner came to ask Harold.

"Say, Harold, who are those people?"

"My underlings."

"Is that what you meant when you said you needed to make preparations, Harold-sama?"

"Yeah. But in the end, it was all for nothing."

"Uuuh, I'm sorry..."

Although Colette offered words of apology to Harold, Liner did not understand what she meant and simply tilted his head in doubt.

For the time being, there was nothing left to do in this place, so they returned to the road they had originally come from and headed for the nearby town. They had not particularly planned it beforehand, but Liner and Colette spontaneously followed after Harold. While being fed up of Liner who kept asking again and again about the secret of his strength, Harold warned him not to tell others about his presence in this occasion or about the people working for him; meanwhile, those same people had carried the robed man to some abandoned and deserted ruins, where Harold later joined them.

Liner tried to follow him there, but Harold told him he would give him information afterwards, under the condition that Liner would temporarily step back. Then, out of the reach of any outsider's eyes, he instructed the four people working for him, including the man who was restrained earlier, to join with Elu, and he dismissed them.

For now, believing he had managed to put things on the right course, Harold took a rest. It was due to a miscalculation on his part that he had been forced to offer his help in that scene, but when considering the distant future, there was some value in giving a good impression to Liner and Colette.

For now, the both of them were supposed to once again chase after Ventus and Lilium to get back the treasured sword. That being the case, they were going to need to know where to go, and the current situation was great for Harold, as he could point out the way for them in a natural fashion. This way, he would be able to smoothly guide Colette and Liner.

With that intention in mind, and having spent enough time, he headed towards the inn where he had kept the two of them waiting.

After Harold knocked on the door of the room that was assigned to them, Liner's face came out from inside.

"I've been waiting, Harold!"

He approached like a faithful dog that had been waiting for his master and captured Harold, pulling him inside the room by his arm. His eyes seemed to be begging Harold to hurry and share his information.

"Calm the hell down! What are you? A child?"

With his palm, Harold forcefully pushed back Liner's excessively close face. Colette then pulled him back by grabbing the nape of his neck.

"I, I am sorry for that, Harold-sama

"Seriously..."

While letting out a sigh of shock and amazement, Harold let himself fall on a chair that came with the inn's room.

"What do you want to ask?"

"Do you know where the guys who stole the sword escaped to?"

"From the information I have, it seems like they're escaping towards the southwest. Their destination might be Lorenz. "

To be more accurate, they were going ever further from there, to Solesphere, where the whole trio would meet up to then take a boat to the royal capital. However, Harold wanted things to follow the original story and did not need to tell the truth.

Upon being informed of the destination of the people who stole his sword, Liner was once again in high spirits despite having fallen into a dangerous situation just a short while before. That power of will was admirable.

"Alright! Knowing that, then..."

"You're not about to say that you're going to chase after them right away, are you?"

However, that excitement was immediately frozen by Colette. Colette acted as a limiter on the recklessness of Liner, who would easily get caught up in the spur of the moment. These kinds of exchanges were also a common sight in the game.

It seemed like the pessimistic Colette who lacked energy had now returned to

her normal condition. With her muscles-for-brains battle style, and, in contrast, her personality that allowed her to calmly assess things; she could be said to be quite a good fit for Liner.

As for Liner himself, he was overwhelmed by the power of his childhood friend.

"I'm not, but..."

"No buts about it."

As Harold was having such inconsequential thoughts, Liner was argued down by Colette. In the end, they rested their bodies properly, and they were going to chase after the thieves only after getting prepared.

It seemed like without a doubt that Colette was going to tag along. For Harold, that meant that standing out personally like he did was all worthwhile.

"By the way, Harold-sama. Excuse me, but, what happened to the person you caught earlier?"

As Colette asked that, her attitude was completely different than the one she had directed at Liner. She had asked her question quite nervously. Harold could not possibly tell her about how the man had been released etc., so he deceived her.

"He was appropriately dealt with. But well, he was a dead lead."

"A dead lead?"

"That man was not a comrade of the Trinity group. At most, he was just collaborating with them."

"What does that change?"

"He doesn't have any information on the people who stole the sword. So we're not going to be able to reach trinity's base, or at least, not through his aid."

While avoiding to speak of the specifics, he appealed to the fact that the man was almost unrelated to the case.

Liner was dissatisfied, but, in the end, he comprehended Harold's words.

Perhaps it was just Harold's imagination, but it felt like this Liner was a little more understanding than the one in the game, or maybe this was due to the

influence of Harold's own actions. Well, Liner having the ears to actually listen to Harold could not be a disadvantage.

The honest truth was that Liner being this friendly was a surprise to Harold. Judging from Liner's personality, Harold did figure he would not be disliked as much as his character was in the original story, but still, due to the harsh words he had spoken during the tournament's contest, he thought Liner would at least have a little bit of a grudge against him.

Still, even if not for that, for a meeting after an interval of five years, Liner was being far more friendly than expected. Harold had no complaints about that, but he wondered, why did he leave such an excellent impression on Liner, Itsuki and all those other guys?

He was perplexed as that had happened again and again.

"With this, our talk is over."

Saying so, Harold stood up and tried to get out of the room, but a question was thrown at his back along the way.

"Harold, what are you going to do after this?"

"I've no need to tell you that."

"Don't be like that. Could it be that... You said their name was Trinity, right? If you intend to pursue them, then let's go together!"

Was he being invited by the protagonist right now?

Harold had never considered the idea of joining them before, but regardless, he could not predict how the future events would change if he were to join the hero's party. He would not necessarily fall into a fatal situation because of it, but rather than doing that, proceeding in accordance to the original story was a more reliable solution to get to the key points that would lead to stopping Justus.

But above all, his relation to Erica was disastrously awful, and she was absolutely indispensable to the hero's party. He did not want to bring to the party any discord that did not exist in the game.

So, his reply to this was "No".

"Don't make me laugh. I have other things to do."

"I see... Still, it would be reassuring to be together with you."

Liner seemed terribly disappointed, but not in his wildest dreams would he have imagined that the one, who was currently in his presence, was the one responsible for the theft of his sword. Despite the possibility of that fact coming to light, Harold had no choice but to act together with Liner.

Still, at great pains, he had obtained the opportunity to talk face to face to Liner. He felt like it would be a shame if he had just parted from him right now. Besides, like what had happened this time, some other unexpected development could occur in the future as well, so Harold decided to indirectly give some warnings to Liner.

However, it could be suspicious if he was too direct with that or if he brought up the subject out of context. So, he needed to convey the important matter, and yet do it in a way where it wouldn't be suspicious in the flow of the conversation... After thinking for a short while, Harold slowly opened his mouth.

"Look, you're still too weak. And you're still very far from reaching me."

"W-what?!"

Liner got stirred up from the sudden harsh words. However, he lost his fire immediately after, and turned his head away with a sour expression on his face.

"Well, compared to you, I'm certainly weaker..."

"Our status are different, so that's only natural."

Even Harold found his manner of speaking to be horrid, but what the word "status" was referring to was the game's balance. It was a fact that there was a big difference in combat and movement capacities between Harold and Liner, as, in the game, Harold was set up to cross swords all by himself with Liner who was supposed to have a party of four in the fight.

Well, Harold could not declare that this was surely the case either, as it depended on Liner's efforts and way of fighting. This was because, although this world did look like a game, it could hardly be said to be exactly the same as a game.

"Therefore, engrave this into your mind: you must not overestimate your strength."

"What do you mean?"

"It's foolish for a weakling to fight with his power alone. When your power is not sufficient, then you have to group up with others. That is the fate of the weak."

In better terms, he was telling Liner not to slack off in making companions. If Liner were to act alone again like he did this time, it would be bad for Harold's heart.

Though Colette was going to become a companion in Liner's party from now on, what made Harold anxious was whether Liner would be able to add more members thereafter. That was why he wanted Liner not to forget his weaknesses, to gather some companions that complemented him, and to cooperate with them in battle.

If he did not do so, then in the future, some difficulties that he would not be able to overcome would be awaiting him.

"The weak..."

However, perhaps Harold had said too much as Liner was slightly dejected. Harold had expected a more rebellious reaction, but it seemed like his words had struck deeper than he had thought. Perhaps Liner was keenly aware of his lack of strength without having to be told about it.

"...However, the one thing you must never neglect is trying to become stronger. That's all the more true if you believe you're weak."

At those words, Liner's head, which had been hanging in shame, promptly rose up again. After Liner took on that blow, Harold next turned his eyes towards Colette. Despite receiving Harold's look, Colette returned his glance and nodded strongly, without getting flustered. Perhaps she had gotten ahold of this lesson for herself in the previous night's matter.

With the current Colette by his side, Liner would surely be quite encouraged.

"Well then, time to leave."

There was nothing more to be said.

Having concluded that, Harold left the room, this time for good.

Chapter 86

Having successfully stolen the treasured sword, Harold's group avoided Liner's pursuit and safely returned to the royal capital.

Their purpose was to deliver the sword to Harrison. Since they were supposed to not be able to speak, the delivery went smoothly and quickly ended. However, because of that, they did not get any rest and they were immediately given a new order.

Their next destination was some ruins. The appellation "Ruins" was a substitute to what was rather referred to as dungeons and labyrinths in RPG terms. According to this world's, or rather, to the game's settings, what was commonly referred to as "ruins" were the remains of an ancient civilization, and within them could be found items and weapons that were impossible to reproduce using the current day's technology.

Discovering those objects, and making easy money out of them, was the main goal of adventurers. Having been adventurers in the past, Liner's parents had also been in some ruins before, and that was where they had found the Gram Grand treasured sword.

While a few of those ruins did appear in the original story, there were countless ruins in this world that were not shown in the game. Well, when thinking about it, it would have been ridiculous if only two of them had been left by the civilization of the ancients on the whole continent like in the game's case, especially since that was not the only thing which was not actually shown in the game in favor of convenience.

As such, the ruins that Harold was now going to explore was part of those that had not appeared in the original story.

On the way towards his new destination, Harold did feel some anxiety regarding the exploration of the unknown, but that sentiment was completely thrust aside by his excitement. In short, to him, this was a call to going on an adventure.

He had cleared the game's ruins dozens of times, yet after coming to this world, the only information he had gotten about them were from books.

But this was his first time actually seeing these ruins with his own eyes, and he was extremely intrigued about what was going on inside these ruins.

While thinking that it would be nice to become an adventurer if he ended up being unable to return to his former world after clearing the game's scenario, Harold came to the Haibar ruins. Naturally, he was together with Ventus and Liliu.

The Haibar ruins, where Harold and the others were made to go, had yet to be fully explored by anyone. As a matter of course, it was unknown how deep it went. It was quite unreasonable to expect three people, among which there were no professional adventurers, to explore such ruins by themselves. Moreover, it was strange how Harrison even came to know about a treasure being in those ruins. But well, Justus had probably somehow gotten some relevant information about them.

Still, even if Harold thought of these things, there was not much he could do about the situation, he could only quickly go inside and find the object he was looking for.

The huge entrance to the all-important ruins was halfway up a rocky mountain; however, the bottom of said mountain was still considerably prosperous regardless. Although this was also because there was a populated town right next to the ruins, in general, adventurers would naturally gather around these sorts of big ruins.

Moreover, those adventurers needed food and items, so even some merchants would come so as to sell their products at unreasonable prices. Exploring ruins was not a short process; it was therefore easier and cheaper to make a base near the entrance rather than to go back to town every single time. In short, since the adventurers would live on site, they needed some supplies to support their lifestyles.

It was a cycle, the adventurers would sell the items they discovered in their exploration, as well as any fangs and furs of monsters that had commercial value, and then they would use the money they made from that to buy the articles they needed.

This place gathered people and objects together, and gave birth to a back and forth exchange of money and goods. With that, different goods were distributed amongst the people, and an economy had come to be. As the scale of that economy increased, the surrounding shops and simple post stations were maintained, and so people kept on gathering. As a result, a community akin to a small town had been born.

Although some monsters did appear, there were always adventurers on site who were experienced with weapons. They would defend the place in case of an attack, which was a great help to lower the merchants' anxiety to a minimum. Or so Harold had heard.

(Still, this place is livelier than I expected. I don't want to stand out too much though...)

The order that was imposed on Harold was to bring back a treasure that was said to be at the deepest part of the Haibar ruins. However, he also had to be aware of the fact that he could not spend too much time on that task. First of all, this was to help keep Harrison in a good mood, but more importantly, Harold had to gather all the treasures by the time Liner would finally reach Harrison.

No matter how long this time's operation would take, Harold wanted to get this done within a month. There were thousands and thousands of ruins that had yet to be fully explored by adventurers after decades, and yet he had to do this with a group of only three, in the span of a month. If he were to actually accomplish such a tremendous feat, it would surely attract lots of attention. After that, perhaps not only his identity as Harold, but even his black-robed identity would get a bad reputation, which would make it difficult for him to move around. All he could do was to get to the deepest part of the ruins while being seen by as few people as possible, and then to leave as if nothing happened.

That was his decision; however, although he wanted to just go ahead and do it, he still believed that challenging a labyrinth without any prior knowledge would be too reckless. It would have been helpful for Harold if there was someone kind enough to share the common knowledge and information regarding the exploration of the ruins, but while adventurers would cooperate

with each other depending on the situation, they were still basically rivals. It was unthinkable for them to share information about the job that brought bread on their tables in exchange for nothing.

So Harold had no other choice than to give them something in exchange for the information he needed, an information fee.

The problem was that Harold's mouth was not suitable for

negotiations. If he flicked a big sum of money at the adventurers and condescendingly asked them about the ruins, he would only end up provoking them no matter how he thought about it. Therefore, he decided to change his approach accordingly.

"Now then, let's talk."

"Heh, of course, you've bought so much from me after all."

If the adventurers were no good, then the merchants were the key. For them, money came above their pride, as long as they were paid, they would share some of the information they had; and above all, Harold figured they were well aware that that kind of information could turn a profit.

However, the people he was facing were professionals at making money who therefore tried to take advantage of him upon seeing him buy their goods as he was told to, so it was necessary for him to moderately threaten them and to ask the same question from multiple merchants to increase the accuracy of the information he had in hand.

Because of that, Harold had ended up using a big sum of money. He even wondered whether Justus would cover his expenses if he asked him.

(Like hell he would....)

Harold's idea was quite foolish.

He had not been employed by Justus. Officially, Harold was just offering his services to him to redeem himself from the crimes he had committed; he was no more than something like a servant under Justus' control.

When he thought back upon it calmly, the way he was being treated was depressing, but dwelling on it was a waste of time, so he just cleared his mind and went to take on the exploration of the Haibar ruins.

For now, through the tactics Harold had used to get information, he had

already bought food, recovery items, and some other essential articles which he carried with him as he swimmingly ascended the mountain till he reached the ruins' entrance. To aid him in his ascent, there was an artificially made path that had been well maintained.

However, in contrast to the light steps Harold was taking, the many adventurers he caught sight of had a tense atmosphere around them.

There were monsters and many other causes for distress on the roads of these ruins, so lots of people had lost their lives there.

Therefore, those who had become professionals on said roads were always that tense. Harold took a deep breath at once and settled down his heart.

"Let's go."

Ventus and Lilium followed closely behind Harold who took the first step forward.

They had a good field of vision near the entrance thanks to the light that came from outside. As for when they reached places where the outside light could not reach, their path was lighted by multiple lamps that were hanging along the road.

The true nature of the light within those lamps was actually "light stones", a type of stones that were naturally luminescent. Their grades were divided depending on the color and strength of the light, and it was said that, when it came to the top quality light stones, even a fist-sized sample could be sold for enough money to build a house. That being said, the stones that were used in lamps like these ones were worthless.

Under the guidance of the light, Harold advanced through the narrow passages that were around two meters wide. After slowly descending for a few minutes, his field of vision suddenly opened up.

"....."

Fascinated, Harold forgot himself for a moment at the sight of the room he was facing. While slightly distorted, the room was shaped like a dome, and the best part of it was that every single rock that could be seen was actually a light stone. There were soft, light purple lights glowing from every direction. It was a fantastic sight.

Certainly, judging from the strength of the lights and their color, those were

low-grade light stones that did not have much value as products. However, that had nothing to do with how beautiful they were.

Looking up, Harold assessed that the highest part of the ceiling was likely at a height of no less than ten meters. From that shape, it would be hard to believe that the room was made by nature, which left Harold wondering just how it had been dug in. Was that the work of adventurers or was it built by the civilization of the ancients who once lived in these ruins? Harold was sincerely interested. When he looked below, there was an underground space which was so deep that even the ceiling could not compare.

Along the walls of the room, there was a very long pathway built as a spiral that went deeper and deeper, layer by layer. Along the way of that passage, Harold could see many tunnels which appeared to be connected to the inner part of the rocky wall. Among them, there was probably a road that led to the center of the ruins and perhaps even further inside. But while Harold had these thoughts, it did not mean he did not understand that he needed to take his time to explore the ruins so as to avoid any accidents.

In case of a monster encounter in this construction, it would be extremely difficult to fight. That was why, apparently, one was basically supposed to just run away upon any monster encounter inside the ruins. Not only was it difficult to fight in narrow spaces, but it also seemed like the monsters that lived in ruins had a habit of forming groups. So there was a risk of being attacked by said groups, and Harold had heard that, when these monsters fall into an agitated state, things could get way out of hand.

That was probably one of the main factors that hindered people during explorations.

While looking out for any signs of monsters in the surroundings, Harold and the others went down the spiral-shaped pathway, aiming for the deepest part. They kept descending without sparing a single look into the tunnels along the way.

That was because, considering the structure of the map and how RPGs worked, Harold had judged that the important items would be at the deepest part of the ruins. He would rather search the place with the highest priority first, and only after that would he sweep the place clean.

”...Stop. “

The duo behind Harold followed his instruction. The three of them stopped their feet as Harold felt a presence different from a human's in the depths of the 20 meters tunnel ahead of him.

As the trio concealed their breaths, a three-meter tall Golem emerged from the tunnel. That monster made of soil, with its body that stuck out of the earth with rocks attached to it like armor, was a regular sight in the game. Slowly and gradually, it went down the passageway. Apparently, it was moving towards the same direction as Harold and the others.

Harold was hesitating about what needed to be done. Perhaps it would be better to wait for the Golem to go somewhere else.

However, there was no way that the Golem would be the only monster the group would encounter; and so, if a different monster were to come out from another tunnel from behind the group, there was a risk of being attacked from both sides.

Although the trio would not be defeated, it would still cause an uproar that would cause even more monsters to appear, in which case, they might have to return to the entrance temporarily. That would be troublesome.

Harold sharpened his senses even further, and assessed that

there were no other monsters than that Golem, or at least, there were none in the range that he could sense.

So, there was only one enemy. Its movements were dull, and it had not even noticed the existence of Harold, Ventus and Lilius.

Harold quietly put down his luggage, and without any sound, he pulled out the two swords that were sheathed at his waist. Within the dim place, the swords shone bewitchingly under the glow of the light stones.

There were two rays of light. They weren't rough like thunder, rather, they were refined, and sharp lights. The rays intersected with the Golem's body, and after a very short pause, the monster collapsed to pieces. Harold went down on top of that wreckage, and looked down with cynical eyes on the mountain of soil that used to be a Golem.

Then, he had a thought. *If they're at this level, then no matter how many groups we face, we should be able to deal with them.*

Perhaps this was an effect of the great efforts he had put in, having grown accustomed to fighting alone against a many. Harold realized that he had seriously grown.

But that atmosphere was cut off by a single scream.

"Uoooooooooooooh!"

That deep voice sounded as if it had come from the bottom of the earth, but rather than a scream, it was more like a war cry. Along with that, Harold's feet felt an earth tremor, much like an earthquake.

"I have a bad feeling about this" Almost at the same time as Harold thought that, he finally saw the source of these happenings. A single man came rolling out from a tunnel at the bottom layer of the room, with a cloud of a dust and a thunderous noise accompanying him. As the man was still too far, and due to the combined work of the cloud of dust and of the dim lighting, Harold could hardly see him. But judging from his voice, he was certainly a man.

Perhaps because he was injured somewhere, the man was having a hard time standing up after rolling out of the tunnel. Then, multiple groups of monsters appeared from the tunnel and surrounded him.

The monsters were bipedal moles that had some sort of mechanisms at the tip of their noses; those were thick, drill-like horns that could rotate on themselves. The monsters also had long claws that they would clang together to threaten their enemies. This was a group of spiral moles. As for the man, he was still collapsed on the ground and looked quite miserable.

Letting out a sigh towards the troublesome matter that was occurring before him while thinking "So that's what happens when you agitate the monsters." as if this was someone else's problem, Harold jumped down into the middle of the groups of spiral moles.

Chapter 87

He was running out of breath. His heart was beating so fast it felt like it would explode at any moment, and his limbs felt as heavy as iron or lead.

Nevertheless, the man, Hugo Grafton, did not stop running. Given what was behind him, he did not have much of a choice in the matter.

While scrapping their claws on the ground and raising a cloud of dust in their wake, a group of Spiral moles were approaching. Their numbers were over twenty. He would be able to do something if they were five or less, but Hugo did not possess a superhuman strength that would allow him to fight these numbers.

Therefore, he had no other choice than to use all his energy to escape. For, if the monsters were to catch up, he would undoubtedly end up dying.

As he ran, he was frantically swinging his arms and pouring his strength into his feet, that seemed like they were about to get tangled up at any moment.

When it came to speed, he would have been able to shake the Spiral Moles off a long time ago if he was going in a straight line. However, in the zigzagging passages within the tunnel, that wasn't so easy, especially since his pursuers were accustomed to moving here.

The reason Hugo had fallen into such a situation was his very own greed. In the depths of the ruins, there were countless small rooms, and in one of them was a treasure chest.

The only monster in that room was a lone Spiral mole. Hugo had thought that that one monster alone would not be difficult to handle. But, perhaps as a retribution for being taken lightly, when the Spiral mole was on the verge of being killed, it called its companions. Three new Spiral moles appeared. If Hugo had run away then and there, perhaps he would have managed to do something.

The truth was that Hugo did want to escape. However, unfortunately, the Spiral moles were blocking the small room's only exit. To make matters worse, they seemed to be in an agitated state, so time was of the essence.

Still, he somehow managed to knock down two of them, but when there was only one remaining, Hugo hesitated. Since there was only one enemy left, escape was a possibility. Although Hugo had not taken any direct hits, he did have wounds as he had taken some damage before, and his stamina was consumed as well.

Hence why he wanted to run away, but due to the fight, the Spiral mole was still in an agitated state. If Hugo just left the mole as it was, it could end up calling its companions, in which case both victory and escape would become extremely difficult. As Hugo hesitated like so, he dropped his guard ever so lightly, and the Spiral mole let out a strident squeak-like cry. That was a signal to call its companions.

"Damn it! Why did I hesitate? I should have just run away!"

Although Hugo blustered that, it was already too late. Immediately after he escaped from the small room at full speed, Spiral moles suddenly appeared from everywhere. From that point onwards, the situation turned into a game of tag, with Hugo's life on the line.

He somehow managed to pull through the fierce attacks of the monsters that came flooding in, until finally, he saw an exit that led to an open space.

"Uoooooooooooooh!"

Evading a claw attack by a hair's breadth, he dived through that exit in a falling motion.

He rolled on the ground while scratching his limbs on the rocks that were protruding from there. Then, when he struck his abdomen on a slightly large rock, his body, which had been rolling with a strong momentum, came to a stop.

"Aaargh"

That impact forced the air out of his lungs. Due to the pain, he couldn't breathe properly, and the resulting slight lack of oxygen made his field of vision tremble. Moreover, there was almost no strength left in his body. He needed to immediately stand up and escape, but that was just wishful thinking.

While groaning, Hugo somehow managed to raise his body a little; however, what came into his field of view was a group of Spiral moles surrounding him.

Their numbers had increased even further.

"Shit, is this it....?"

As he had expected, with this, both victory and escape were now impossible. Because he had taken on the dangerous occupation of being an adventurer, he had the resolve to lose his life on the job. However, he did not think that this day would be it.

He had not expected death to come for him so soon.

Just when Hugo had resigned himself... a straight flash of light ran through the dim ruins. It was by no means showy; it was a fast, sharp, and truly instantaneous manifestation of white light.

After that flash, only a single thing had changed. In a space that had been empty just a few seconds earlier, there was someone standing between Hugo and the Spiral moles.

Because that person was covered with a robe and was giving his back to him, Hugo could not figure what his face looked like, but judging from his physique, he made a rough guess that he was a man. However, he had no time to think about whom it was or the like.

The spiral moles, which were near the man who had suddenly appeared, had their heads drop down to the ground. As they fell, their blood colorfully scattered in the vicinity. Yet the man with the robe did not avoid it, he received the rain of blood without moving an inch.

"If you don't want to get mixed up in what's coming, go crawl somewhere else."

Hugo couldn't move even if he wanted to, so that was a useless warning to give him. However, in the next moment, he was shown the reason behind the man's words.

Seeing their companions get killed right in front of them, the spiral moles that were still in an agitated state attacked the man in the robe.

First, a mole's arm flew off. Each of its astoundingly sharp claws flew past Hugo while spinning and drew an arc of blood over him.

That scene brought upon an odd sensation, as if the effect had come without a cause to it.

It seemed as if the right arm of the spiral mole had been suddenly cut off and blown away when it had commenced its attack. Hugo could tell that the man in the robe had probably done something, but he couldn't tell what.

With no regards for Hugo and his confusion, strange events, outside of his understanding, kept occurring one after the other.

The upper-halves and lower-halves of the spiral moles were disconnected. The drills at the tip of their noses were cut right in half, starting from the crowns of their heads. Before Hugo knew it, tens of slashes, maybe hundreds, had been dealt.

Like that, the only thing the spiral moles could do was to be hunted down. They died without even being able to resist.

For a while now, Hugo had not been able to see the robed man who was responsible for this onslaught. The speed of his movements and attacks was probably too fast for Hugo's eyes to see. And while vision was bad in the dim ruins, there was no way such a phenomenon would occur if the man's speed was only a little faster than his.

It seemed like this robed man was far stronger than Hugo.

"Hey, you dead?"

Despite how critical the situation was, Hugo was lost in the sight of that surreal scene. What called back Hugo's awareness was the voice of the robed man who had annihilated more than 20 Spiral moles, in just a few minutes, before Hugo had even realized what was happening.

Why had he come to confirm that Hugo was dead rather than to confirm that he was alive?

"N-no, I'm fine. You really saved me there."

For the time being, Hugo reported his own safety. Still, judging from the robed man's voice, he was considerably young. He probably was even younger than Hugo himself.

The man's face could not clearly be seen as it was still hidden by the robe he was wearing, but when he turned towards Hugo for a moment, he showed an unnatural stiffness. However, that was only for a moment, after which the young man questioned Hugo with a somewhat irritated voice.

"Is that so? Now then, what's going on?"

"W, well, actually...."

In spite of himself, Hugo found himself at a loss for words. He had fallen into that pinch because he had ignored the basic established rules of exploring ruins. He had fought even though he was completely unable to manage the risks that came with that. As an adventurer, he was ashamed; he had brought trouble not only to this young man, but to the other adventurers as well.

That man seemed to have roughly guessed the situation, but his doubts had probably turned into convictions upon seeing Hugo having a hard time enunciating his words. He let out a grand sigh.

"Avoid fighting in the ruins as much as possible, and never push the monsters into an agitated state. I heard those were ironclad rules."

"Sorry..."

Hugo could do nothing but bow his head in apology to this man who was younger than him. On top of him having made a rookie mistake, there was a very high chance that this matter would agitate other monsters. Moreover, there was a thick smell of blood hanging over the area, which could attract even more monsters here.

So, in order to prevent that, it was necessary to quickly dispose of the dead bodies and to restrict entry into the ruins for a period of time that could last a week or so. It was a measure to ensure the adventurers' safety, but there would still be some adventurers who had to stay and work together to get rid of the dead bodies.

In short, Hugo had gotten in the way of the other adventurers.

"Humph, whatever. That's none of my concern."

The man certainly did not seem concerned. The robed man sent a Spiral mole's corpse rolling elsewhere, walked on the ground that was wet with blood as if he was on a stroll, and went to enter the tunnel through which Hugo had run away for his life.

Hugo hastily stopped him.

"W-w-wait, where are you going?!"

"There is something I want to do at the depths of the ruins."

"That's the case for everyone that comes here, but it's dangerous to go now!"

Hugo used every word at his disposal to explain the dangers that would come to the man were he to dive into the ruins right away. Hugo was still feeling the pressure from almost losing his life just moments earlier.

Faced with that, the man's response was "You're in no position to freaking talk.". That one statement mercilessly pierced into Hugo's wounds. However, since Hugo was the one at fault here, he kept stubbornly trying to persuade the man.

"On the contrary, it's precisely because of my position that I can say this. I don't want my own mistakes to expose you to any more danger."

"You don't ever shut up, do you? Approximately how long will the corpses' disposal and that period of inactivity last?"

"Well, around ten days"

"That's out of the question."

"I'm telling you, hold on! You'll be in real danger."

"That's probably the case for the likes of you, bastard. But for me, it's gonna be a walk in the park."

His words were outrageously overconfident, but judging from his ability to reduce the spiral moles into a sea of blood, it was certainly hard to imagine that he would die easily.

However, nevertheless, Hugo could not support the man in his choice. It was impossible for Adventurers to survive by only being strong.

"Monsters are not the only danger. There are traps and there are places where you can't enter without deciphering some texts and whatnot. Exploring ruins is a long process; you should wait until the situation reaches the right conditions so that you'll be able to keep your item and stamina consumption to a minimum."

"...I see, that makes sense."

Though Hugo's persuasion seemed to be completely useless, the man in the

robe surprisingly gave in.

Feeling great relief from that, Hugo was about to suggest to go above ground for the time being and to give the others a report regarding the situation within the ruins. However, before he could do so, his shoulders were firmly gripped by that man.

"Then, you'll be coming with me. You should be able to guide me on the way, right?"

"....Huh? WHAT?!"

His body is even shorter than mine, just where does he bring so much power from? While he wondered that, Hugo's muscular body that stood at a height of 185 centimeters, was dragged along, and it was useless for him to argue about it.

"You're being noisy, stop screaming damn it."

"Of course I'm gonna scream, what did you expect?! You're basically telling me to go die!"

"You were already pretty much dead earlier. Even if this kills you, it won't change anything."

"This is way beyond unreasonable... also, who the hell are these guys?!"

Before Hugo even realized it, a pair of people, whose faces were concealed by robes, had appeared behind him and the man. Encircled by three unidentifiable people whose faces were all covered in robes, Hugo was in a considerably eerie situation.

"They're my baggage carriers. "

"Oh, so they're your companions... Yo, I'm Hugo. You guys must have it tough, being abused by a tyrant like him."

Hugo sardonically called the self-centered robed man a tyrant. However, upon being called baggage carriers, the two people accompanying that man showed no reaction, they only remained silent. When Hugo felt like he could not endure the silence any longer, he spoke up.

"...They don't talk much, do they?"

"Of course they don't. Those two don't have the ability to speak."

"What the hell? You all are terrifying."

That was the conclusion he had gathered from the information that had been given to him.

The tyrant's companions were not normal either apparently.

That unidentifiable man was overwhelmingly powerful, but he did not listen to others, and those eerie attendants who were with him could not talk. The communication within that strange, unbelievable party was catastrophic. While Hugo, who had been coerced into joining that bunch, was cursing a god he did not believe in for this day that was certainly the worst day of his entire life.

Chapter 88

Hugo had been living as an adventurer since he was 15 years old. The reason he went down that road, despite being aware of the dangers, was that he dreamed of making a fortune by discovering items within ruins. Pursuing a fantasy could not be said to be a particularly rare motivation for adventurers. At any rate, he had been active as an adventurer for almost eight years. Although he was still a 23 years old young man, he was already a full-fledged adventurer.

Thus, based on all that experience he had, Hugo felt that the three individuals who were currently standing in his view were really atypical, especially the young tyrant that served as their leader. That applied to both his behavior as an adventurer and to his fighting capability.

As Hugo had expected, the monsters inside the ruins were more active than usual. The narrow spaces within the ruins were not suitable for fighting, so most adventurers would decide to retreat at this point. Therefore, naturally, Hugo advised the man to do just that.

However, the man's only response was the word "coward". On top of that, Hugo was forced to keep acting as a guide. With a sigh, he told himself "He's a tyrant indeed", even though he was the one whom had come up with that nickname.

"Still, he's really strong..." Muttered Hugo, faced with a scene that he had seen many times already by now. At the robed man's feet was the bleeding corpse of a monster that was cut up in three, with its head, upper body and lower body separated from each other.

It had appeared a few seconds prior, and it had ended up in this state as soon as it looked towards the group and thought of attacking them. Perhaps because this fight wasn't as serious as the one against the groups of spiral moles, or perhaps because Hugo's eyes had grown accustomed to this kind of sight, he was starting to be able to see the man's movements, little by little.

In the fight just now, the robed man had drawn his sword from the scabbard

that was hanging at his waist and powerfully cut off the monster's head. As the man returned his sword to its initial position, he cut the monster's upper and lower body in two equal halves. Because the man killed the monsters that easily, even Hugo who had battle experience, did not get a turn, let alone the robed man's two companions that had been called baggage carriers.

Before Hugo realized it, the group was approaching the deepest area that had been reached by anyone so far in the ruins. Normally, anyone would have proceed with great caution up to here, because in most cases, upon encountering a monster, one would be forced to stay on standby or to escape, but there was no need to consider those things due to the robed man's overwhelming strength.

As an adventurer, Hugo wanted to say that this was unfair; the common sense of exploring ruins did not apply to this robed man, to the point where he had no need to follow any of the regular, established tactics.

So, while Hugo was being dumbfounded by the situation, the group arrived at the deepest explored part of these ruins, which had taken them only a few hours.

"This is as far as anyone has been. No one has ever advanced any further than here."

As Hugo said that, his words echoed in the wide, circular room of 50 meters (164 feet) in diameter. Along the room's walls, there was a spiral-shaped pathway, similar to the dome-shaped space close to the ruins' entrance from before.

But what attracted one's attention the most in the room was a gigantic gate that had patterns engraved on it. This tightly-closed door had never been opened.

That was because, to open it, it was necessary to solve the mechanism of the circular room. But that was a highly difficult task, for while there was some headway in solving said mechanism through using clues, such as the wall paintings that could be seen here and there on the gate as well as some letters that seemed to come from the ancient civilizations, the progress was still extremely slow among the ruins' explorers.

One of the causes for that was that the Haibar ruins were relatively newly

discovered, but in reality, the biggest barrier was those ancient letters. There was no decent data on them, and it was almost impossible to decipher them through speculations, even historians had classified these letters as “Lost characters”.

Strength alone was not enough to traverse these ruins, which is why exploring them was said to be so difficult.

Even the robed man would likely find himself at an impasse here. Thinking so, Hugo furtively threw a sidelong glance at the man. The robed man was staring at a certain point with his arms crossed, but it wasn't clear what his facial expression meant at all. Following his line of sight, the man seemed to be looking at some of the ancient letters that Hugo had noticed earlier.

After looking at them for a while, the man suddenly muttered something.

“Mmh, I see.”

“You can actually read this!?”

“Naturally.”

“No freaking way!”

Even if scholars and specialists from all over the world researched those letters, their accuracy would be low, and they would be forced to use mere guesswork to read more than half of the text. It was only natural to be surprised upon being told that someone could decipher those characters that thoughtlessly.

If the man's statement was true, then that would mean he held some extremely important knowledge that would unravel the history of the world. He would likely be in great demand in the research establishments from all around the world in the future. No, perhaps that was already the case.

“By the way, what was written there?”

“『The light at the summit』『The origin of the stars』”

“...Yeah, even with the translation, I still don't get it.”

Hugo, who couldn't be said to be very knowledgeable, was not able to understand the meaning that seemed to be written behind those ancient letters.

The robed man, however, appeared to have come up with an answer, as he looked upwards and started searching for something. Soon, his eyes stopped on a certain spot, and he stepped towards the rising spiral-shaped pathway without saying anything. His two attendants and Hugo followed after him. The group walked up to a height equivalent to the fourth or fifth floor of a building. There was no railing to hold onto on the passage and there were places where the ground was collapsed along the way, but the three robed people advanced without hesitation. Hugo started doubting whether they were capable of feeling fear at all.

He was the only one who struggled until the group finally arrived at one of the many small rooms that could be found along the pathway. However, most the small rooms in this area had already been explored, so there were no valuable treasures remaining.

This particular small room had a candlestick as big as an adult male in it, but that was also the case for all the other small rooms. However, the robed man still approached it and lighted it up using fire magic. As a result, the room's interior became brighter, but no other changes occurred besides that. Although Hugo expected him to be disappointed by this result, the robed man just closely observed the candlestick's base, and spoke up.

"Give me a torch."

Thereupon, one of the attendants did as told and took out a one-meter-long (40 inches) wooden stick. Upon receiving it, the robed man put the torch in contact with the fire atop the candlestick and he transferred the fire from one object to the other.

He then left the small room while holding the lit up torch. He entered a different small room this time, which was a little further down the pathway, and he used the torch's fire to once again light up the room's candlestick. Afterwards, while occasionally deciphering the ancient characters that were written down in various places, the robed man kept going up and down the pathway and carried out the same action over and over again, lighting up a total of five candlesticks at the end.

The moment he lit up the last one, there was a rumbling sound in the ground followed closely by an earth tremor. Unable to believe what had just happened, Hugo left the small room to confirm the state of the gate that was down below;

and he was at a loss for words.

The gate was open. Many adventurers had racked their brains through repeated trial and error, and yet, the gate had never let anyone in before. Even so, the man had quickly solved the room's mechanism like it was no big deal and went down the room's spiral-shaped pathway, heading towards the now opened gate. Hugo could not help but question him.

"H-hold on! How did you know how to open the door?"

"Well, the instructions to open it were thoughtfully written down."

"Is that what those ancient letters meant...?"

Solving the mechanism was apparently this simple provided that one was able to perfectly read those ancient letters. Well, even so, the robed man might have been the only one in the world who could actually read them.

Who was he, really? His strength and knowledge were both extraordinary and far from any common sense.

Judging from his voice, he was still a young man, but Hugo felt like he would be able to believe it if he was told that he was actually a warrior, or a sage.

With no regards for what Hugo was feeling at the moment, the robed man proceeded further ahead. The space behind the door was wider and more artificial than the room from before. While in the previous room the ground was not smooth as it was made from gravel and sand, the ground in this space was an actual floor made of white stones; similarly to the ground, the walls in the previous room were rugged, like the rocky surfaces of a cave. But here, they were actually straight and made of the same white material as the floor.

Furthermore, halfway through this space, massive pillars, some exquisite sculptures and other elaborate works were put on display.

Above all that, this place was unimaginably bright for a space situated within the ruins. Looking carefully, the floor, the walls and the ceiling were made of light stones. That being the case, it was a different type of light stones from the ones that could be seen elsewhere in the ruins. They had a white glow, quite different from that of the sunlight, which illuminated this space that was originally dark, and yet they didn't give off an excessive brightness that pierced one's eyes. Rather, they gave off a soft light with a warm feeling to it. Just taking the walls and bringing them back would be considered making a good

earning.

However, these kinds of intentions would not arise in anyone, thanks to the sacred atmosphere that enveloped the white walls of this place. For comparison's sake, this space appeared to be like the majestic temples that would come up in tales and legends. Even Hugo, who had never really been religious, could not even consider defiling this place.

For a little while, the only sound that could be heard was the echo of the four people's footsteps, and after the group advanced a little further, even that sound disappeared.

"Amazing..." Hugo unconsciously muttered so. He was so amazed that he himself was not aware he had spoken up as his eyes remain glued to the ceiling. The group of four had finally arrived at a certain room in which an altar was set up. Like it was the case on the way there, there was an otherworldly atmosphere in the room, but the most overwhelming part of it was actually the ceiling, which was embedded with numerous huge crystals. There were several hundreds of those surrounding a single, thick crystal that was probably around 5 meters (200 inches) in length.

The sparkle that came from the reflection of the white light stones' light on the crystals gave one the delusion that the stars of the night sky had dropped and came within hands reach.

Thus, while Hugo had his breath taken before the superb view, the robed man bluntly marched into the tranquil and sacred room, without immersing himself in those kinds of sentiments. Hugo was more than shocked by the man's boldness; it was quite astonishing.

Yet, when the man stood before the treasure chest that was placed atop the altar for offerings, he slowly gave a deep bow. Hugo felt that was quite surprising.

Self-centered and arrogant; that was the image Hugo had of the man. So, before, he had not taken him for someone who would be conscious of manners. The man raised his head and put his hands on the treasure chest. However, it did not open up; it only made a rattling sound.

So as to take a peek, Hugo approached until the treasure chest was close at hand. Apparently, a key was necessary to open it.

"What are you going to do?"

"...Can't open it without a key? That only applies in a world that's managed by a system."

"Huh?"

Hugo did not understand the meaning of those words. However, before he could question him about that, the man took action.

He drew the sword that was sheathed at his waist, and before anyone could stop him, a flash had reached the treasure chest. There was a high-pitched sound followed by the sound of something falling down.

The man had destroyed the chest's lock without hesitation. Having witnessed that, Hugo corrected his remark that the robed man was conscious of manners.

Well, more importantly...

"So, what's the treasure?"

Hugo's nature as an adventurer manifested itself.

But while he was getting excited about what had come from the treasure chest in front of him, he suddenly heard strange noises coming from somewhere, as if something was being cracked. Curious, he looked around in his surroundings but he couldn't get a grasp of where those strange sounds were coming from. As he kept looking around, the noises were becoming louder and louder, and more numerous.

Then, Hugo, who was still confused, perceived something at the edge of his field of vision. When he looked there, there were the tiny and transparent fragments of an object that reflected the room's light. Moreover, there weren't just two or three of them, several of those fragments had dropped to the ground.

Hugo had a bad feeling about this. Following that presentiment, he looked upwards.

There, was a group of several hundreds of crystals with countless cracks running through them; they were probably going to break and fall very soon.

"Hey, this is bad! Hurry and esca——"

But Hugo never got to finish his sentence. Countless fragments of crumbled crystals rained down incessantly. Then, under the cover of those fragments, something got down from the ceiling with a roaring sound.

While basking in the glow of the sparkling rain of falling crystals, a spherical, metallic object of about 3 meters appeared. Although Hugo wondered what this was and what this occurrence meant, he did not reach an answer, however it seemed like this sphere had been hidden in the group of crystals.

”This thing, just what in the world...?”

Hugo hesitatingly approached the mysterious object. As he worried about what he should do, a change occurred within the sphere.

With a loud noise, some parts of the metal sphere were stripped off, and two red lights lit up from there. In addition, two sharp arms appeared from it, followed by eight feet that came out from the lower part, lifting up its whole metallic body.

Through the dexterous movements of those legs, the sphere turned towards Hugo and the others, and there was clear hostility burning inside its lit up parts that looked like two red eyes.

Chapter 89

"It's coming."

Almost at the same moment as the robed man spoke up, tentacles, that were shaped like ropes yet supple like whips, came out from the sphere and rushed towards Hugo and the others.

Hugo promptly drew out the halberd that was hanging on his back, and fought back. He repelled the first one and cut the second one. However, he was unable to deal with the third one, and it entwined around his left ankle, pulling him down. Then, he was lifted upside down and left hanging in midair.

"Ooh!?"

Even if he fell to the ground, he would suffer little to no damage since he was merely hanging upside down, but even so, he had been deprived of his freedom, so he couldn't help getting impatient. It was possible for him to try to unbind himself using his halberd, however, in this unstable position; he could mistakenly cut his foot off. At the time Hugo was hesitating about what to do, he suddenly started free falling.

He let out a groan as his body heavily hit the ground, but he still hurriedly opened the distance between him and the sphere. Then, the robed man went ahead to take Hugo's place. While perfectly handling the assault of the tentacles that were attacking him with irregular movements, the man spoke up.

"Hey, bastards, take that damn thing and get out of the ruins!"

That instruction was directed at the two baggage holders. There was a thin, straight sword stuck in the wall right next to them.

That sword was probably the object that had been inside the treasure chest. The robed man had thrown it forward, sending it to those people, and making it cut the tentacles that were restraining Hugo on the way. That was likely in order to avoid dragging the two baggage carriers, who were his companions, into the fight.

Following the man's instructions, the duo pulled out the sword from the wall

and walked back outside of the room. The sphere tried to follow them, but the robed man stood in front of it, blocking its way. Hugo, who was standing right by his side, spoke to him.

"Hey, let's escape, too!"

"This thing is a watchdog. It will chase after us to take back the treasure that's been snatched away from it."

"How is this thing a dog? Dogs are supposed to be cute, man! Anyway, I'm telling you, we'll be just fine if we run away!"

"Yeah, you're right, we would probably be able to escape. The two of us, that is."

Hugo could not say anything against the words of the robed man who was focused on the enemy in front of him. That was because Hugo was able to understand that the man, that he himself had called a tyrant, was trying to hold back this machine-like monster here in order to avoid getting his companions mixed up into this, as well as any other adventurers that might have still been in the ruins.

Since Hugo had made the spiral moles fall into a state of agitation, the other adventurers who were exploring the ruins should have gone above ground, having perceived the accident. However, what if some of them had to stay in the ruins for some reason, or what if they had simply not perceived the accident in the first place? What would happen to them after encountering this monster?

That would not end well, no matter how Hugo thought about it. So, killing the monster right here was the best course of action.

Upon the sudden appearance of such a bizarre monster, how many people could stay this calm, and yet still be able to assess the situation like that, without minding the danger? That alone was enough to understand that the robed man had been through many battles and scenes of carnage.

Thinking back upon it, given his personality, the robed man should have chosen to escape, using Hugo as a sacrifice. In that scenario, Hugo would likely have put up as much resistance as he possibly could so as to protect his own life. He would have been the perfect sacrificial pawn to earn some time.

Yet, the man had protected him without any hesitation, and now he was brandishing his sword so that his companions and some other adventurers he did not even know, would not be exposed to danger.

This man was a selfish and arrogant tyrant who did not know the meaning of fear. But perhaps he was also a compassionate person.

"... Oh, I see. In other words, if we kill this thing, it will solve everything."

"What? We? You're going to stay, too?"

"I am not a coward who would escape and leave you here by yourself!"

"Just know that I won't help you next time."

"I would have been able to ward it off better at that time if you had just spoken louder! What was with that barely tense "It's coming"? Was that your impression of some small bird's chirping?!"

"Don't blame me, you're the one who's always being noisy, going "cui cui cui" like a damn magpie. Plus it looked like you wouldn't manage to ward off anything if I didn't intervene. So it doesn't seem like there was any flaw in my logic to me."

"Shut up, idiot!"

As the two of them were having that violent exchange of words, an equally violent battle was unfolding. Because of the monster's massive body, its tentacles' attacks were quite heavy, but accordingly, the sphere itself had no speed to speak of. However, its tentacles were moving at high speeds and covering it, therefore allowing it to attack and defend at will.

To make matters worse, even when some of the tentacles were cut off, other ones would come forth from the sphere's body, one after the other. A few attacks did land on its main body, but due to its thick outer shell, none of the hits ended up being decisive blows. It had already completely repelled dozens of attacks so far.

"Damn it! There is no end to them!"

"Are you gonna complain after declaring oh-so-dramatically that you'd stay?"

"Dramatically?! When the hell did I do that?! Check your ears, they're not

working!”

Provoked by the robed man, Hugo furiously answered back. Hugo certainly did not have a hint of a strategy, but there was no sense of impatience from him. The main reason for this was that the fight was easy. Of course, that did not mean that the enemy was easy to deal with. The battle felt easy to Hugo because he was fighting alongside the robed man. Whenever Hugo’s moves were lacking, the man intervened. He was skillfully covering the gaps in Hugo’s defense. It was like he had a perfect understanding of Hugo’s timing and fighting style, as he absolutely never trespassed within the range that Hugo’s attacks could reach. On the contrary, when Hugo would use his somewhat rash special attacks to destroy the enemy’s defense and to kill its rising momentum, the robed man would sometimes instruct him, saying “Duck!” or “Jump back!”. A very short instant after Hugo would follow those directions; an attack would come from his blind spot, completely out of his notice, and would cut the empty space where he previously was. That meant that the robed man had completely seen through the enemy’s attacks and timing. Hugo could not even imagine how much piled up experience it had taken the man to reach this level of skill. However, said man was on Hugo’s side. There was nothing more reassuring than this, however...

“No way around it. I’ll settle this fight right quick with my special move!”

Hugo shouted in order to encourage himself. By this time, he was able to perceive what the robed man was actually waiting for. He was trying to probe Hugo’s strength. If he was thinking of beating that monster, he would likely have been able to easily crush it. However, he did not do so, and Hugo could not think of any other meaning regarding why the robed man kept on supporting him. Hugo did not understand what the robed man’s goal was, but if he wanted to see his power, then he was going to show him.

“I’ll leave it to you to cover me!”

“You’ve got some guts to boss me around.”

Although he said that, the man guarded Hugo, acting as his shield, so that no attacks would reach him. Meanwhile, Hugo had stayed on the spot, and was raising his concentration.

“He’s one reliable fellow” thought Hugo, as the corner of his mouth went up. Today was the two people’s first encounter, they had met merely a few hours prior to this, and yet Hugo did not feel the slightest uneasiness as he fought alongside the robed man. Even Hugo himself felt that that thought was strange, but still, it did not feel bad at all.

Then, the moment Hugo’s concentration reached its peak; the robed man’s sword cut all of the monster’s present tentacles right off, leading to the appearance of a path that went straight towards the enemy. Hugo ran right past the robed man, and as all of his body’s muscles swelled to their limit, he gripped his halberd with both of his hands and swung it downward using all his power.

『Gozan Aranami』!!(Great slash of the raging waves)

At that moment, following a slash, a shock wave ran through the earth. The way it amplified its strength and dug out the ground while drawing closer and closer to the enemy, was exactly like a gigantic raging wave, rampaging in the middle of a sea storm.

Unable to defend or to dodge, the spherical monster was not able to resist after taking a direct hit from Hugo’s special move; on the contrary, it was overwhelmed, like a small boat being sunk down by a big wave.



“Haah, just how long is it gonna take to reach the exit...?”

“If you’ve got the leisure for pointless chatter, then walk faster.”

It had been a while since the monster, which the robed man had referred to as a watchdog, had been crushed. There was no reason to stay on site any further, so the duo was quietly walking towards the exit above ground. But whenever Hugo let any idle complaint escape from his mouth along the way, he would receive a strict order from the robed man.

Well, despite everything that had transpired, Hugo had survived and was now able to come back all the way here; however, he still had some unanswered

questions. As Hugo's thoughts came to that, he decided to directly ask the man.

"Say."

"What?"

"Why did you leave the monster from earlier to me? I think it would have been easier to win if you fought it."

"Oh, that? Heh."

The robed man condescendingly scoffed at Hugo's question.

"It was a warning for you, bastard. If you learned anything through this experience, then you just might stop exploring the ruins recklessly."

"I see", said Hugo to himself, consenting to the robed man's words. He had acted against the established rules of exploring ruins and had been on the verge of death after agitating the spiral moles. Not only had that exposed the other adventurers to danger, but if someone other than Hugo perished because of his actions, it would be impossible for him to ever repent. That was likely what the robed man was warning him about.

"Right, I'll keep that engraved in my mind."

"Good."

"May I ask one more thing?"

"...What?"

"You're no adventurer, are you? So why did you come to the ruins?"

"...What makes you think I'm not an adventurer?"

"You know way too little about exploring ruins. And you didn't really show interest in any treasure or item, excluding the sword that you took in the end. Rather, was that sword your actual goal?"

If that was the case, then that would mean the robed man had entered the ruins knowing full well that the sword would be there, and that was what Hugo was curious about.

After staying silent for a while, the man forced some words out of his mouth.

"Do you know about what people refer to as the "treasured objects"?"

"Well, I've heard the legends but... wait, don't tell me that..."

"The sword from earlier is one of them."

"No way! The treasured objects are just a fantasy, aren't they?"

"If that's what you want to believe, suit yourself."

The robed man strongly affirmed that the treasured object was the real deal. As for Hugo, he was overpowered by that atmosphere and found himself at a loss for words.

On one hand he believed this was unbelievable, but on the other hand, considering how peculiar the robed man was, Hugo could accept that this was the real deal. The man's strength was completely abnormal, he had knowledge about the ancient civilizations, and his companions could hardly be described as normal either. The exploration of ruins was an open door to opportunities, and from times immemorial, there had been teams that were formed for the sole purpose of obtaining the treasured objects that could be waiting in the depths of the world's numerous ruins. Thinking of that, Hugo did not find it strange for the robed man's group to be focused solely on that goal.

"Right now, there are people who are digging up treasured objects from all over the continent. As for the treasured objects that are already owned by others, those people would just steal them."

"It's fine if they discover them in ruins, but if they actually steal them, that's another story."

"The theft and whatnot don't matter at all. The problem is, what are those people trying to do by collecting the treasured objects?"

"Aren't they selling them to collectors in exchange for gold?"

"...It would be nice if that was all there is to it."

"You're speaking in riddles right now. So, in the end, the reason you're looking for the treasured objects is so that those people won't get their hands on them?"

"Something like that. By the way, I heard that they are actually a trio of black-robed people who do not speak a single word."

"Oh, I see.... Wait, that's you guys!"

Hugo jumped back and took some distance.

As for the robed man, he just smirked, as if mocking that reaction.

"This operation was a success. With this, word of a "black robed trio" will spread, even though we're not actually them."

"...That's your aim? Seriously, you scared me there."

As he realized the man was simply making fun of him, Hugo calmed down. If this man was really one of those thieves, he would not go out of his way to talk about them to Hugo, who didn't even know they existed. On the contrary, guessing from his words and behavior, the man might have been impersonating the criminals so as to make their actions known. If the day's matter were to spread, it would reach a point where the three black robed people would catch the attention of not only the adventurers, but also of the town's people. That would surely make things difficult for the actual criminals. In a word, the robed man and his companions' ulterior motive were to put the blame of their own actions on the thieves. Their method was slow but not ineffective.

Moreover, when thinking about it, the two people from earlier, who were said not to have the faculty of language, were merely imitating their thieves counterparts. After all, Hugo did not believe that people who were not able to communicate at all were that common.

Rather than that, what Hugo could not tell was, why was this man doing such a thing? But when he thought of asking about that, he was the one who ended being questioned by the robed man this time.

"Say, why does a moron like you bother exploring ruins?"

"I'm hoping to find a treasure and strike it rich."

"So you're motivated by greed, huh."

"Of course I am. I'm an adventurer after all."

Hugo answered to the man's cynicism with a dynamic Laugh.

In the present era, becoming an adventurer could hardly be said to be a decent path to take. Those who took on that work would certainly be able to live without working for the rest of their lives if they were able to discover a

valuable enough treasure, but even saying that only a handful of adventurers could live such lives could be taken as an overstatement. Not to say that the probability of it happening was nonexistent, but that kind of turn of events was still close to impossible.

Many people looked down on adventurers as being idiots for risking their lives for the sake of such a ridiculously small possibility, and even the adventurers themselves were aware that what they were doing was stupid.

Their job exposed them to as much danger as someone who belonged to the knight order or the army, but unlike those people, who protected the country and nation, an adventurer's death was not honorable. They'd either become food for monsters, get caught in a trap within ruins, or they would be met with an accident, such as sliding from a slope or being hit by falling rocks. There were various causes of death for them, but each one of those was just the result of their own mistakes, for they were aware of the danger of their profession and yet they still faced it.

Some scholars did explore the ruins from a historical point of view, so as to study the ancient civilizations that were said to have ruled over the continent in the past, but those people comprised less than a thousandth of all the adventurers. Also, in the first place, they couldn't be said to be adventurers in the true sense of the term.

Consequently, even though children who dreamed of belonging to the knight order or the military were backed up by their parents, it was not uncommon for the ones who would start speaking of becoming adventurers to be stopped and punished with a punch so as to change their idea. At least, that was the case for Hugo. He still remembered the pain from being hit by his father's fist.

"But then, why are you idling away here?"

"What do you mean?"

"The Cadiz ruins. That's where you'd find what you're looking for, moron."

Go there, is what the man was actually saying.

The Cadiz ruins were not big by any means; moreover, Hugo had heard that they had already been fully explored. He had once been there too, but there was nothing special or worth of mention in them.

However, if there was a hidden mechanism there like in the Haibar ruins, then it

still had more depths to explore. What if there were some actual treasures and items there? This was an advice from a man who knew the location of a treasured object after all. It was impossible for Hugo to not be curious. However, why had this man given information like that to him? Far from being owed anything by the man, Hugo was the one who was indebted to him, so he wondered what this favor was about.

"Say, why are you..."

"Hey, you two! Hurry and get out!"

As Hugo was about to ask a question, a strict and almost angry voice came at him. Looking past the robed man's back, there was another man who was shouting towards this tunnel that lead to the dome shaped room where the spiral moles' corpses were piled together.

Before Hugo even noticed it, it seemed like he had already come back here. Outside the tunnel, only half of the spiral moles corpses were left, though their blood was still there.

The accident in the ruins had probably been reported to the adventurers who were at the base of the mountain, and they were likely all working together on damage control. Normally, Hugo should have been the one to take the initiative to do this work, so he was itching more and more to apologize.

But, above all else, there was something Hugo had to confirm.

"Has anyone come out injured or dead?"

"There are some wounded people, but none of them was seriously injured. Looking at the name on the list, you were the last ones left inside."

When exploring ruins, it was mandatory to put one's name in a certain search list beforehand. That way, the list could be checked out when there was an emergency like the current one and when someone did not return.

While he did think that this situation was nothing to be pleased about, Hugo still felt relieved by that person's answer.

"Even so, it took you long enough to come out. What the hell were you doing?"

"I'm ashamed..."

Hugo was simply dejected from the man's reprimanding words. He thought that it would invite confusion if he were to speak about how the mechanism at the deepest part of the ruins was solved, etc., so, for now, he decided to make it his top priority to deal with the damage control.

But before that, he first had to openly confess that he was responsible for this whole turmoil. However, he figured that if he did so, that robed man would be bothered as well since he had been with him, so he turned around to tell him to take some distance from him. But there was no one there.

Even when Hugo confusedly looked around the vicinity, the robed man was nowhere to be seen. He had completely disappeared, as if he had been a hallucination. But if he really had been a hallucination, Hugo would not be alive by now, so that was probably not the case. Perhaps the man simply did not want to stay in a place exposed to the public gaze like this one. If so, then this was for the best.

"Say, will you hear me out for a second?"

"What? If you've got energy to spare, use it to freaking help out here."

"Well, speaking of that, I owe you an apology."

With this, Hugo was able to obediently confess his blunder. However, in the end, his only regret was to have been unable to ask that man's name.



"...Oho, Harold has already snatched away the treasured object from the ruins?"

Towards the information that had just reached him, Justus let out an unusually surprised tone of voice.

This time, Harold had been heading to the Haibar ruins. From his conjecture, Justus was almost certain there was a treasured object in the deepest part of those ruins, but by no means did he think that the journey to get there would be easy.

Exploring ruins was the actual profession of adventurers, and yet, even by working together, they did not succeed at going any further in the ruins. So, naturally, Justus had a suitable reason to think it would be a difficult task.

Therefore, he had predicted that Harold would struggle to some extent, but would eventually manage to do something about the treasured object through some feat of strength.

So, just what had happened? According to the report that had come to Justus, Harold had correctly solved the ruins' mechanism without a hitch, and obtained the treasured object in a mere day.

His work was certainly much beyond Justus' expectations, and for that, he wanted to praise him.

However, with this, Justus was able to turn the suspicions he had about Harold into convictions.

Ever since he knew Harold, Justus always felt he was an oddity. When he contacted him for his experiment, he figured he was just someone strong that he would use as a pawn, but when he faced him, he intuitively understood. He was just like him.

Within his eyes, there was a strong will to take any measures that were necessary for his goals.

Harold's interception of the Sarian Empire's invasion was likely a consequence of that will. However, the more Justus examined that event, the more mysterious points came out.

First of all, how was Harold able to sense the invasion coming? Through that invasion, Justus acquired guinea pigs from the stellar tribe for his research by using people from another country. But at the same time, he had also intended to use that as a starting point to ensnare or make a man fall from power, the man who could become an obstacle to him and could denigrate the knight order's authority, Vincent Van Vestel.

However, as it turned out, the youngest prodigy to ever join the knight order had held back that invasion in the end and had taken the enemy commander as a prisoner.

It would have been fine had he simply been a genius. However, Harold was not a genius, he was an irregular.

He had worn the empire's military uniform in the forest and then showed up in front of the knight order. By doing so, he had made it known to the order that the enemy was the empire's army, and not the stellar tribe. But that would not

have been possible if Harold had not gotten information about the invasion beforehand.

Not to mention that that would have naturally been impossible had he not joined the order at 13 years old. In other words, it was safe to think that Harold had had the information for quite a while, and had been actively working on obstructing the invasion.

What came to reinforce that hypothesis was that, in the Beltis forest's battle, Harold was in command of some powerful people who belonged neither to the knight order, nor to the imperial army, nor to the stellar tribe. That group played a big part in lowering the number of captured people and casualties in the battle.

Since they were under Harold's commands, it was most likely right to think that he had perceived the invasion before it happened.

What was that group? Justus could not grasp their true colors; however, he guessed they likely were either Harold's underlings or the Sumeragi family's people. Either way, that did not change the fact that Harold had done some elaborate preparations.

From all the above-mentioned, Justus was suspicious of Harold. But even so, he still did take him under his control back then, because he had been curious about where he was headed to in the future. Was Harold going to choose a path of destruction, just like him? Or was he going to choose a different path from Justus, despite having the same eyes as him?

Even now, it wasn't clear to him where Harold would be heading in the future. But for the first time in a very long while, Justus' interest was stimulated by something other than his own research. Perhaps it wasn't due to reason but instinct.

However, the situation had changed.

This time, Harold had deciphered characters from a lost, ancient civilization. Even Justus himself would not have been able to do that. That was because there were no historical records or documents left from or about that civilization.

It was not wrong to say that this feat was impossible for the people of this world's current era.

Then, why was Harold able to decipher those ancient letters?

If that matter was the only one, he would have thought that it probably was due to some information that Harold's family just happened to own. However, Justus could not have such thoughts when adding the Beltis forest's case on top of this one.

By themselves, either of those events could accidentally happen due to a miraculous accumulation of unlikely elements, but when happenings with such low probability were made to happen twice, then coincidence had nothing to do with them anymore, they became inevitable.

To cause such inevitable events, it was necessary to know a certain "something". That something was: the future.

The Sarian Empire's invasion, the meaning of those ancient characters' that someone would end up deciphering sooner or later and maybe even Justus' plans. Perhaps Harold simply "knew" all that. He had called out Justus' name in his very first meeting with him. At that time, Harold, at the very least, had already known who the individual called Justus Freund was.

Then there were the words he had said right after: "Why would a man like you come here?". Back then, Justus had thought that that phrasing, "a man like you", referred to his status as a well-known scientist. But what if Harold had said that because he knew Justus' true nature?

"Aahh", Justus let a sigh of lamentation escape him and echo within the laboratory. He sat at his chair while looking up at the ceiling and spoke up.

"You... Are you the greatest obstacle on my path, Harold Stokes? You, who has the same destructive eyes as me."

How ironic it would be if Justus' greatest weapon, his own curiosity, were to turn its fangs on him at the very last moment.

Yet, Justus laughed, "I see it now, this is perfect". He had a flash of insight akin to a divine revelation, and at this moment, he, who was an atheist, offered a prayer of thanks to god.

Back in those days, why had he bothered to put Harold under his orders despite having suspicions about him? That had to be so he could kill the man who would become the greatest obstacle in his path with his own hands.

"Thank you for giving up your own life to serve as a proof of my love, Harold.

No matter what, you alone, I will absolutely kill.”

As Justus said so, there was no anger on his face; it was filled only with deep affection.

Chapter 90

In『Brave Hearts』, Hugo Crafton was one of the members of the Hero's party. He was a so-called tank character, acting as a vanguard with a high attack and defense power.

Moreover, in the original story, being 23 years old, Hugo was the oldest in the party and he was depicted as the protagonist's nice older brother figure. He was usually idle, but he could be relied on at important times.

Meeting him within the Haibar ruins was a completely unexpected happening for Harold.

Harold expected even less that he would end up meeting Hugo while he was still disguised as a member of trinity. From now on, he would likely have to get in Liner and the others' way in that dress up. Moreover, he would probably come in contact with them with his true identity as well.

There was a possibility that, at that time, the party would suspect that Harold and his alter-ego were the same person. To avoid that, he had put on an elaborate show in front of Colette and Liner, but he was not prepared to do the same with Hugo.

However, that did not mean that he could have simply left him directly without doing anything else.

The main reason for this was that, in the original story, it was within the Cadiz ruins that Hugo was supposed to become a member of Liner and the others' team. Those Cadiz ruins appeared considerably early in the game, and long story short, excluding Liner and Colette, Hugo became a member of the team earlier than anyone else.

At the time, the party had already left for a journey to retrieve Liner's treasured sword, and it would take about three weeks to go from the Haibar ruins to the Cadiz ruins on foot. Although Liner's situation was also a factor, Harold needed to drive Hugo out of the Haibar ruins as soon as possible.

Therefore, he reluctantly decided to quickly clear the Haibar ruins while keeping his face hidden. He thought about doing this as himself, but he figured that if he

did so without preparations or a clear plan, it could expose his true identity and bring him some trouble in the future.

Although Harold had cleared the ruins against his will due to the above-mentioned reasons, it was worth it. Because from the regular reports he got from Elu later on, he received news that a large man with short blue hair was now traveling with Liner and Colette. From that description of his appearance, there was no mistaking that the man in question was Hugo. Apparently, they had met at the very last moment possible.

At present, about two months had passed since the team had encountered Hugo. Meanwhile, Harold continued collecting treasured objects from all over the continent, just like Harrison ordered him. Moreover, by now, he had already collected six of them, and he was soon going to head for the next one.

On the way, Harold did think that things were going too smoothly, but based on what he heard from the reports that he regularly received from Elu, Liner also seemed to be clearing the original story's events at an excellent pace.

The truth was that Harold had been racking his brains for a while about the pace of clearing the game's events. Even though he had played the game, he did not know how long the original story lasted for in real time, nor how the flow of time worked within the game; It had no sense of the changing seasons, nor did it contain any information about the day, month or year of any of the its events. Had the story's events happened in the span of half a year? A year? Even more than that? Harold couldn't tell, hence why he was in a hurry regarding Hugo's matter.

However, if he thought about it, the game was about a battle for salvation, a battle to stop a plan that would basically destroy the whole world. So, naturally, the whole continent was dragged into it, to the point where it perhaps could have even been called a war.

As one would expect, it would likely have been too difficult for the hero's party, which could only have six people at best, to fight such a massive battle for an extended period of time. Had they not settled the decisive battle in a short enough time within the story, then Liner and the others would have been at a disadvantage with their low war potential.

Therefore, Harold hypothesized that the fight, or rather, that the whole original story might have had occurred in a shorter time frame than he had assumed.

Then, one day, as Harold was starting to have those thoughts, something happened.

It was during his spare time, after he had collected the sixth treasure but before he was told of his next destination. In response to a call he had received from Justus, he was returning to the laboratory after a long time. He had a bad presentiment as he reluctantly stepped towards the laboratory while cursing at Justus in his mind for handling his workmen too roughly.

After knocking once, Harold hurriedly entered the room, and immediately cut to the chase.

"What's your business?"

"Harold? You're being a little bit of a bother right now."

"Like you're one to talk about being a bother."

"I'm not as bad as you are."

"Say what you have to say already. Stop beating around the bush."

"You don't have much patience, do you? Then, I'll skip over the details. Do you remember Lifa?"

"...What about her?"

As Lifa's name came out of Justus' mouth, Harold barely managed to somehow prevent his face from getting distorted. It took him great pains just to answer without showing any facial expression.

Moreover, as if he could see through those feelings, Justus mercilessly threw yet another bomb at Harold.

"It seems like she's been sniffing around for information about you lately. Should I rid you of her?"

Harold's head was hurting. Colette, Hugo, and now Lifa; why were they all taking actions that differed from the original story? Thanks to that, Lifa had caught Justus' eyes in a different meaning than Harold had feared.

This was troublesome in its own way. Needless to say that, by "rid you of her", Justus meant "kill her".

But even if Harold were to refuse the offer, and to instead, pretend that it did not concern him while leaving the matter to Justus, then Justus would likely end

up killing Lifa by some means or using her for his plans.

Naturally, Harold could not allow that. Therefore, he had to handle this situation himself.

"...Where is she right now?"

"Oh? You're personally going to her?"

"You've got a problem with that?"

"Well, not really but..."

"It looks like you've got something to say."

"I was surprised, that's all. I mean, you like them that young?"

"Drop dead, you goddamn lunatic."

After hearing of Lifa's location, Harold hurriedly left the laboratory while cursing Justus, who was accusing him of being a pedophile with a very serious expression on his face.



From the story Lifa had heard from Elu, there were some mysterious matters between the point where Harold was to be executed and the point where he became a test subject in the laboratory. Moreover, there was something else that was suspicious, because, even in Justus' story about his meeting with Harold in the past, Harold's goals were still kept concealed.

So, Lifa figured that, if she could uncover what those goals were, then perhaps she would be able to know about the circumstances surrounding Harold and she would be able to see what goals could push him to wager his very own life. Harold would probably tell her that there was no meaning to her actions, but still, she couldn't just do nothing while knowing that he did not have much longer to live.

Because she believed there might be some way left to save him.

Well, if Lifa told him that, far from thanking her, that eccentric man would probably snarl at her instead. That was why she was investigating the circumstances around the time when Harold was sent to the tribunal without even telling Harold himself.

Thus now, it had been approximately one month after she had started investigating, and Harold was standing before her, looking clearly irritated.

The both of them were currently inside some building. There wasn't even a single window to be seen, so they might have been in a basement. As for how things ended up this way, Lifa was in the royal capital at the time, indirectly getting some of the information she needed. Then, in some unfrequented back alley, she was suddenly kidnapped; her field of vision was blocked off, and before she could even say anything, her body was incapacitated as well. She was unable to resist while she was being taken away, and after a little while, the cloth on her eyes was removed, and what faced her was the twitching temple on Harold's forehead. She had no idea where she was, nor how she had been brought there, but from the moment of the abduction up to the present, she had felt only a single person's presence, so Harold had probably done this alone, by his own initiative.

"So, what the hell have you been doing exactly?"

Harold's voice sounded ill-humored.

"... Nothing in particular. Rather than that, untie me already."

Both of Lifa's arms were tied to a chair which was creaking as she rocked her restrained body on it. However, Harold paid no attention to that.

"Answer my question. What the hell have you been doing?"

Harold's voice and eyes were becoming sharper and sharper. Apparently, feigning ignorance was not going to cut it for Lifa. In the first place, Harold probably knew what Lifa had done since he had gone this far already. Otherwise, there would be no reason for him to be in such a bad mood.

Therefore, even though Lifa did not want her actions to be exposed, it was meaningless for her to resist since things had ended up like this. With that in mind, she spoke up.

"...I've been investigating your past."

"Why would you do that?"

“...Because I don’t want to let you die. Because I might be able to find a way to save your life.”

Those were Lifa’s true feelings; this was honestly the main reason behind her actions.

She did not know how much time was left before Harold’s death, so even if she were to help him, chances were that she would only extend his life a little bit. Also, in the first place, she probably had only one in a ten thousand chance to actually be of any help to him.

However, even if her actions were meaningless, that was no reason to give up on Harold’s life. At least as far as Lifa was concerned, Harold was a cynical man whose attitude was not all that good, but he was the first person to acknowledge her efforts and achievements, which were basically her life itself. Surely, no one other than Lifa would be able to understand how gratifying that was to her.

“Stop that, and don’t ever do it again.”

“No, I won’t stop.”

“Are you kidding me? Do you want to die?”

“I’m aware of the risks.”

For the time being, it seemed like just investigating that story could get her killed. This matter was becoming more and more abnormal, and it just went to show how dangerous Harold’s situation was.

Well, maybe that was only natural since Harold’s goals were so important he was willing to trade his life for them. As for Lifa, she could no longer withdraw from this.

Perhaps because he felt her strong determination, Harold changed his approach.

“Why go that far? Do you want me to owe you?”

“That’s not it. Rather, it’s the opposite.”

“What?”

“I want to express my gratitude to you. And I’m willing to risk my life for it.”

Even though she wasn't as twisted as Harold, Lifa was able to express her feelings honestly only in these kind of circumstances. But Harold had a dubious expression on his face. He likely did not understand what Lifa was being thankful about.

"I don't remember doing anything for you to be grateful for."

"I didn't expect you to. Even if I tell you, you probably won't be able to understand."

It was useless on Harold's part to pay attention to Lifa's motivations anyway, because the truth was that no words were going to persuade her.

"...If, as you said, you're grateful to me, then do as I say."

"How is that related to me being grateful?! What I want to do is to help you."

"I didn't ask for that, and I don't need that either."

"I am doing it because I want to do it, it doesn't matter whether you wish for it or not."

Harold didn't want anything to interfere with his situation, and Lifa wanted to do anything possible to help him.

No matter what, there was no way they would reach a consensus. After that, their dispute continued, and the only thing that progressed was the passing of time. They did that for more than an hour, until they started seeing signs of weariness appearing on each other's faces.

There was already no more choice for either of them than to get the other to give in by force.

"You god damn block head!"

"Like you're one to talk!"

"...This is my last warning. Stop digging into my past."

Harold said so while gripping the handle of the sword that was hanging at his waist.

However, Lifa answered without stepping back.

"...I refuse. "

"...Oh, is that so?"

With a "shing" sound, Harold drew his sword out of its scabbard. It was a black sword that Lifa had seen many times over. On the sword's blade, there was Lifa's own reflection.

"I guess there is no more room for negotiations(*Harold*)

"Sure seems that way."(*Lifa*)

Harold swung down his sword without any hesitation. The sword then cut right through Lifa — or rather, right through the rope that was restraining her.

She was freed from her restraints as the rope that was binding her feebly fell to the ground. Harold was making a sour face. He clicked his tongue as he put his sword back into its scabbard.

This meant that Harold had given in.

However, Lifa did not think that was surprising. She knew that Harold was unexpectedly kind despite being cynical. Even though it was extremely difficult to understand that kindness.

"...Lifa. Do you sincerely want to help me?"

"Yes."

While looking into Harold's eyes, Lifa gave him a strong nod. That was in order to transmit her feelings, even just a little bit, to this stubborn, awkward man.

"Then, you better follow my instructions if you don't want to die. If you act on your own accord, he'll get rid of you."

"Who will?"

"Maybe Justus, or maybe someone under his control."

"...I see."

For some reason, Lifa had expected that answer. As she recalled that man with his washed-out white hair, there were many things Lifa wanted to say, but she refrained from doing so.

"Then, what should I do?"

"For the time being, leave the royal capital."

"You're not trying to get rid of me, are you?"

"I'd sure like to do so, but I'll be coming with you."

The fact that Harold had said that, even though he should have been unable to move about freely at present, just went to show how alarming the situation was. Lifa figured her life was possibly in very serious danger.

Hence why Harold had come to contact her in a hurry.

"I understand. So, where will we be going?"

As Lifa asked him that question, Harold's facial expression became distorted even more than it already was before. He sighed and told her the name of the place the two of them were going to head for.

"Going forward towards the east from here, there is the sumeragi territory. I'll have you do some work there."

Chapter 91

That was a bitter decision for Harold. While the Sumeragi territory was not a direct threat to his life, it still had flags as devastating as the ones raised by working under Justus. Because that place held a bomb of a critical threat level, called Erica.

Furthermore, considering that Justus had a complete grasp on Lifa's actions, he would likely find out that Harold was accompanying her. In short, he was undoubtedly going to discover Harold's connection to the Sumeragi family.

The reason Harold was heading towards the Sumeragi territory despite being aware of all the above was solely because, if he had let Lifa take care of herself, chances were that she would have been killed. Harold could not tell what kind of changes would occur to the original story if that were to happen.

Also, judging from Liner's and the others' progress, there were likely several months left before the game's final battle. But from here on, as Liner's group would become more active, things were going to reach a point where Harold would not know how to deal with Justus anymore. Harold's goals so far had been to obstruct Justus' moves while planning things from behind the scenes, and he had assessed that he would be able to escape before there would be any grounds to prove his actions. But was taking that risk really the right choice?

The honest truth was that Harold had long figured that he would end up being suspected. He did not feel anything that would suggest that from Justus' behavior, but if he looked at his own behavior objectively, he was evidently quite suspicious. Justus would not overlook that.

Plus Harold had carelessly led Justus to surveil Lifa's actions. In other words, he was just paying for his own, numerous mistakes.

However, even so, Justus still kept Harold around, probably because he had no conclusive evidence against him yet, or because he believed that he could still be of some use to him. If so, then Harold just had to keep himself prepared for the worst and to do what he could while not exposing himself too much.

At present, Lifa was the last piece necessary to bring down Justus. If Harold made her join the protagonist's party, then at the very least, his own work would be done. After that, he would just collect the remaining treasured objects while pulling some strings and giving Frieri the instructions they would need so that things would progress smoothly.

If Justus wanted to suspect him, then so be it. There was hardly enough time left for those suspicions to lead him anywhere anyway.

As long as Harold survived until the last battle, and as long as he carried out his essential role till the very last moment, then Justus' evil deeds would be brought to light. Even if he did end up being chased by Justus, Harold would not mind staying on the run for a few months.

So, Justus' suspicions did not really matter to Harold. As long as Lifa did not change her mind, her life would be in danger unless Harold or Liner was nearby. Moreover, Harold knew that it would be no use talking to her.

So, if words were useless, the only way left was to show her the way through actions, by putting together a team like the one in the original story.

That was why he had taken Lifa and had come all the way to the Sumeragi territory with her. The most he had been able to do to deal with Justus regarding this matter was to use an obvious lie. "It would be too troublesome to kill her, so I'm taking her back to her village"; he just scribbled that on some piece of paper and sent it to him.

Harold was probably going to be questioned and drowned in sarcasm anyway no matter what he wrote, but he would just have to say that he does not fancy killing a kid who was just asking questions out of curiosity, and then, even someone like Justus would find himself with fewer ways to be on the offensive regarding the whole matter. In case Harold was asked why he had taken Lifa through the Sumeragi territory, he would just have to say that he happened to meet an acquaintance there. It was possible to pass through the Sumeragi territory to go from the royal capital towards Lifa's native place, the Weiss village, so while this was suspicious, it wasn't unreasonable.

"Ooh, so this is the Sumeragi territory. What a peculiar townscape." (*Lifa*)

It had been a while since Harold had last entered the Sumeragi territory. As for Lifa, having entered the residential area, she was restlessly looking around

the vicinity with curious eyes.

lifa's current appearance reminded Harold of her first visit to the royal capital, at the time when she was sightseeing the capital's main street.

"What? Is it your first time here? It's pretty close to your village though."

"I didn't have anything in particular to do here before. Besides, I've secluded myself at home for a long time to focus on my research."

Saying that, Lifa lightly shrugged her shoulders.

Certainly, in this world, even when a town was in the vicinity of another and when it wasn't far at all, there were still some dangers, such as being attacked by monsters on the way. Nobody would bother to visit another town or village without a clear purpose. Well, still, the main reason was probably Lifa's shut-in lifestyle.

"So, you said we have things to do here but you didn't say what. I need some explanations."

"First, we're going to look for some people."

"People?"

Indeed, the current mission was to find Liner, Colette and Hugo and to set Lifa up with their group.

As for the pretext to get her there, it would probably be enough to just say he wants her to collaborate with Liner and the others. While their team was currently trying to get back the treasured sword, they were also working on solving accidents and other anomalies in various places, giving full play to their soft-hearted natures.

As one would expect from a man who was aiming to become the leader of the knight order in the future, Liner, who was in nearby town, was going to come to the Sumeragi territory upon hearing of the mysterious miasma problem that was occurring there.

This was why Harold had not entirely solved the miasma problem before.

Because it was at this point in the original story that Erica had become a part of the protagonist's party.

For the time being, the ideal choice was to just tell Lifa to join Liner's team without Harold having to show up personally. As a last resort, Harold was also

willing to stand before Liner himself, to avoid any unnecessary trouble.

"They're three people, one with red hair, one with golden hair, and one with blue hair. First we're gonna check if they're in the Sumeragis' streets."

The group stood out a lot due to the weapons they were carrying and their colorful hair. If they had already visited this town, many people would remember.

That would not be strange since they were supposed to soon arrive to the Sumeragi territory, or at least, that was the case based on the calculations Harold had made from Elu's latest regular report. Hence, his first move was to start searching for the team.

However, even so, he was thinking that it would be better to increase the frequency of Elu's reports even more. There were no phones or emails in this world, so naturally, when communicating with someone far away; it was inevitable for the responses to come with a delay.

That delay was one of the reasons why Harold had not been aware of Lifa's absence from the Weiss village before.

"Say, Harold."

As Harold was losing himself in his own thoughts, Lifa called out to him.

"What?"

"Wouldn't you incidentally also be looking for a black and white haired pair of people?"

"...What the hell are you talking about?"

Unable to understand the intent behind Lifa's question, Harold's voice sounded dubious.

However, Lifa did not care about that, she directly raised her right arm and pointed it behind Harold.

"Well, I'm telling you that because——"

Before Lifa could finish her words, two hands were put on both of Harold's shoulders. Then, voices, that Harold did not want to hear, came from both sides of his head.

"I think the people she's referring to..."

"Are the two of us."

Both of the voices were ridiculously refreshing.

However, when Harold heard them, his heart was far from being refreshed; in fact, they made him so concerned that cold sweat was coming out of his body. He slowly looked back behind him, despite knowing that the sight waiting for him was one that he did not want to see.

"It's been a while, Harold."

"But going out with any woman other than Erica is absolutely not okay."

"And he's doing that in the middle of the Sumeragi territory, too."

One of them was Itsuki, who had an overpowering smile on his face; trademark of the Sumeragi siblings. The other one was Francis, who was exaggeratedly shaking his head in disapproval.

These two were a bad combination. They were condemning Harold as if he was a cheating husband caught in the act by an eye-witness, however, rather than that, there was something else Harold had to ask about.

"....Why the hell are you here, Francis?"

"I'm just paying a visit to a friend's house."

"He has unfortunately already met Erica last time, plus he doesn't seem like he's going to do anything bad, so it should be alright."

"Well, I mean, it feels like some horrible watchdog would leap at me out of nowhere if I did do something bad, so, yeah."

"If that's what you wish for, how about I tear your throat out and eat it right now?"

"Hey, stop aiming your blood-thirst at me. Seriously, you're awful at making jokes."

"I am not joking with you" Harold instinctively wanted to say.

Colette had not followed Liner, Hugo had not been in the Cadiz ruins, and Lifa had investigated Harold himself; and now, Francis, who was normally supposed to become the hero's team's companion in the latter half of the original story,

had appeared considerably in advance.

Why was there such a difference between their actions in the game and in this world? At present, Liner was the only one whose actions were normal. *'He's not the protagonist just for show.'* but while Harold was thinking that, there was something else he was worried about; because, as things were, Erica was also likely going to bring him some trouble.

(No, but if I think about it, isn't this more convenient for me?)

Harold calmed himself down to some extent and put his brain to work. The consequences of Francis' actions were the opposite of the others', for Harold believed that not only was this not going to prevent Francis from becoming part of the hero's team, but it was also going to make him join the team earlier than he initially would have.

He feared that if he were to hurriedly send Francis back to his own territory, then it would bring about yet another uncertain variable to his plans. So he figured that perhaps it would be a more sound choice to induce Francis to join the protagonist's party right here.

If the number of companions increased earlier, then so would the speed of the group's progress, and they would become more proficient at using different formations in battle, even though that depended solely on the player's preferences in the game. Although some worrisome plot points that were not in the original story were developing, for Harold, who had fallen into a predicament that he had to solve as soon as possible, telling Francis to join the Hero's team was the obvious choice.

"Say..."

Lifa spoke up while pulling on the hem of her skirt.

"Who are these people?"

"This one is a man who's abnormally attached to his younger sister, and this one is a skirt-chaser who wouldn't utter a complaint even if you were to stab him."

"Oh..."

"Would you please stop those spiteful introductions?!"

All the glances from the surrounding people focused on the noisy group. Within the Sumeragi territory, where kimonos were the norm, Harold's, Lifa's, and Francis' appearances stood out. Furthermore, as the next head of the family, Itsuki was highly popular among the people of the territory, so even if the group had not been making a racket, it was only natural for them to gather attention.

"We're standing out a little too much. How about we move this talk to my house?"

"Not gonna happen. I have no time to keep you company."

"What, you've got something else to do?"

"I'm looking for some people. They're three, one with red hair, one with blue hair, and one with golden hair."

"And you're in hurry? Because if so, you should ask the family head to search them for you."

When Itsuki proposed that, Harold wondered: would this method be more efficient?

Searching through the wide streets of the Sumeragi territory with only two people was certainly going to be hard; moreover, Harold was in a hurry, so he did want to accept the proposal. The problem was that Erica was in the Sumeragi residence.

If Harold thought about it, Lifa hardly had any information that he didn't want Erica to know about.

The only information she had was about how Harold was reducing his life span to gain strength and that therefore his days were numbered — but there would be no problem as long as he warned Lifa not to tell others about that alone. He could inform her that the story about him not having much longer to live was a lie to begin with, but that would certainly be troublesome considering Lifa's character and Harold's own mischievous mouth.

If not for those circumstances, he'd have immediately said the truth; however, fact was that even if he tried to earnestly apologize, he might actually end up hurling abuses at her and somehow breaking off all ties with her, therefore destroying all the efforts he had put out so far. Harold would likely end up being

slapped by both Erica and Lifa for that lie afterwards, but when he put himself in their shoes, then that punishment suddenly seemed pretty light.

"So, what will you do, Harold?"

"...Alright. I'll have you put in some hard work for once."

"Then, I'll guide you there."

Following Itsuki's lead, the group went towards the Sumeragis' residence. They walked on foot for a while, and after going to the place where their carriage was parked and taking it to the highway, they spent one more hour on the road.

Now, the vivid colors of the Sumeragi residence and its pink cherry blossoms were visible.

"Amazing..."

When she got down from the carriage, Lifa was overwhelmed by the atmosphere of the sight in front of her, which she had never seen before. Harold also had his nostalgia stimulated by the nature and the streets of the Sumeragi territory, even though he was actually Japanese inside, which was not the case for Lifa, who seemed to be taking notice of many things. However, Harold naturally couldn't let her be befuddled forever so he lightly poked her head.

"Hey, it hurts!"

"We're going."

"Ah, wait for me!"

Itsuki and Francis were in the lead, and Harold and Lifa were right behind them. Then, when they came close to the residence's gate, they heard some noisy voices.

"What's going on?"

"No idea."

Itsuki tilted his head in wonder.

When Harold turned his feet towards the voices that were not stopping, he saw some people speaking up in front of the gate. Looking at them, Lifa muttered

something.

"Red, golden and blue..."

"....."

Harold cast his eyes down while silently keeping the temple on his forehead in check.

There was no mistaking the three people who were standing before the gate of the Sumeragi family's residence. They were Liner, Colette, and Hugo.

Chapter 92

"Say, Harold, aren't they..."

"Their traits correspond to the people that you two have been looking for."

"Well, that was easy..."

"....."

Harold was still silent. What kind of timing was that? He wanted to curse his fate.

Making an appearance here in front of Liner and the others was the worst development he could think of. Was there any way for him to disappear immediately?

Although Harold unintentionally thought of such things, if he did have the time to do that, then perhaps he should have directly escaped without caring about appearances. However, the other party had noticed Harold's presence before he could do anything.

"Ah, elder brother. Great timing, I need your..."

Right after Erica started speaking, she stopped her words as she saw Harold. Apparently, she was the one that Liner and the others were interacting with in front of the residence's gate. Harold was under the delusion that god or some other supernatural being was out to kill him. However, when he thought about it, this was nothing new considering he had possessed the body of Harold Stokes, who was loved by death flags.

Lured by Erica's words, Liner and the others turned their heads and looked behind them. After a brief moment of silence, a voice filled with joy spoke up Harold's name.

"Harold—!"

The owner of that voice, Liner, ran up to Harold. Seeing that with a sidelong glance, Harold gave out instructions that only Lifa could hear.

"Lifa."

"What?"

"Don't tell them anything regarding how much time I have left to live."

"...Okay."

Though she appeared to be dissatisfied by the request, Lifa still accepted it, and getting her to do so was probably enough to prevent her from leaking too much information.

Now, the only problems left for Harold to deal with were Erica and Colette, and then all the pieces would fall into place. He had better move with the assumption that Liner had been told about his connection to Colette. It would be very bad if those two were to tell Erica about Harold's rescue of the Ameller mother and daughter. He had forbidden Colette to speak of that story, but that was eight years prior, and even if not for that, there was a danger that Liner would just spill the beans out of nowhere.

Besides, Hugo had not seen Harold's face, but he had heard his voice. Above all, Harold's poisonous mouth, which excelled at provoking people, could not easily be forgotten. So there was a risk that Hugo would see through the fact that Harold and the robed man he had met within the Haibar ruins were in fact the same person. Not to mention that, if he were to tell Liner that Harold was impersonating a thief while dressed in a robe, then things would get complicated once again.

It would be fine if Liner misunderstood things in a good way, however, on the contrary, there was a possibility that he would get a bad intuition, like the ones that would come up in some cheap plays. In which case, Harold's relationship with Liner would become completely hostile.

In a flash, the Sumeragi residence had turned into Harold's hell, as if it had been meticulously designed for his own personal suffering.

"What the hell are you doing here?"

"I was still tracking those guys from last time, but I couldn't cross over the mountain because it's a restricted area. So I directly came here to get the permission to go through there..."

While keeping his dismay hidden, Harold first confirmed the actions Liner and

the others had taken so far. Their movements were pretty much the same as they were in the original story, except for the fact that, in the game, while they pursued the three robed people, the team's advance had not come to a standstill due to the restriction on the area where the miasma outbreak had occurred.

But even so, since their advance was not controlled by the game's system here, it was perfectly possible for them to take a detour around the mountain, however, considering that the detour would take a whole month, Harold could understand why Liner wanted to go through that path somehow or another.

That doesn't sound too good. May I listen in as well?"

"Hmm, and you are..."

"My name is Itsuki. I'm the older brother of Erica over there. Also, just saying, but, I'm the second most important person in this household."

"Then, does that mean you let us go through the mountain?"

"Let's talk first and we'll decide after. Now then, come with me."

As Itsuki prompted them to follow him, Liner and the others were invited to the Sumeragi residence. A total of eight people were present, and including Harold, seven of them were characters of the original story; for a fan of the game, this experience was hard to bear with. But even though Harold felt that way, he had no complaints, both because some of the attention had now strayed from himself, and above all because there was a conversation that he needed to have for the sake of the coming future.

Although Harold was being pierced through by a wistful Gaze that seemed to be coming from Erica, he disregarded that for the time being.

The group was received within a spacious, thirty square meters (322 square feet) Japanese-style room where Harold had first met Erica eight years prior. Within the room, Itsuki sat down on the seat of honor which was positioned behind a wooden desk. On his right were Erica, Harold, Lifa and Francis, and as for Liner, Colette and Hugo, they were sitting on the opposite side. Each of them were given some of the tea that Juno had made, and after gulping down a sip of that to moisten his throat, Itsuki started talking.

"Well, first of all, let's start by introducing ourselves. I am Itsuki Sumeragi. I

am the next head of the Sumeragi household and I've been friends with Harold for ten years. "

Liner and Colette were in admiration. Moreover, from the right, Lifa muttered in shock "This has got to be a lie...". That was her reaction to the claim that Itsuki was Harold's friend.

"How is that shocking? What the hell do you take me for?" is what Harold wanted to say as a complaint, but when he thought about it objectively, he realized that her reaction was perfectly natural.

"... I am Erica, Itsuki's younger sister."

"Also, she's engaged to Harold."

Itsuki mercilessly threw out the information that Erica wanted to keep concealed. Harold felt a cold air drifting from her direction. And although he wanted to object Itsuki's words, he did not feel like interjecting in the conversation here due to the excessively heavy pressure that was coming from Erica who was sitting on his left.

Since the atmosphere was becoming worse and worse, Harold pushed himself to do a self-introduction so as to change the subject as fast as possible, even though he had no interest in introducing himself to these people since he believed it wasn't necessary for him to do so anymore by now.

"I'm Harold Stokes."

That was it. Even if he talked about other things, it would come to no good. To begin with, this was meaningless since he was acquainted to most of the people who were present. They also knew him well enough that they did not voice any dissatisfaction even though he had introduced himself by simply giving his name.

As for Hugo, who was the only one not acquainted to Harold: he had an expression of doubt on his face. That was likely because he remembered that tone of voice. Maybe it was better for Harold not to talk too much. As Harold was thinking of not opening his mouth again, Lifa promptly proceeded with her self-introduction.

"I'm Lifa Goodridge. I came here to accompany Harold."

"Accompany him?"

"I don't really know about the details either. Except for the fact that he made me help to look for you people. "

Lifa answered Liner's question while shrugging her shoulders. Harold would be fine as long as she didn't say too much, but still, he had had no time to make any arrangements with her, so he had no choice other than to believe in her ability to read the mood and adapt to it.

The self-introductions continued, and next was Francis' turn.

"I am known as Francis J. Arkwright! I am an authentic prince, with the right to succeed to the crown!"

"You're saying "the right to succeed" and all, but aren't you the 37th in line for that?"

"Did you have to say that?!"

Itsuki mercilessly threw a retort at Francis' words. Like with Erica before, he did not fail to slip in some words that he did not have to say, and there was no mistaking that this was a premeditated crime. It wasn't that he couldn't read the atmosphere; rather, he read the atmosphere and then did this on purpose. That being said, only he knew the aim behind his actions, if there was any.

"Well, after all, you wouldn't succeed to the throne unless at least 37 catastrophes were to happen."

(That is actually gonna happen if things stay as they are....)

Harold sighed within his mind. The whole continent was in danger of going down.

But if that were to happen, then the right to succeed to the throne and whatnot would not be relevant anymore so, in the end, Francis still would not take the crown. However, while he was proud of being the prince, he was not really attached to the title, so he probably didn't mind anyway.

"Then, you're next."

Itsuki cut off Francis' objections and turned the room's attention towards Liner.

"I am Liner Griffith! I guess I'm Harold's friend, but he's also my target, so

that's kind of..."

"You've picked one hard target to aim for."

"It would probably be impossible for most people to catch up to this guy, no matter how much effort they put in."

Itsuki and Francis, who knew of Harold's unreasonable battle capabilities, gave deep nods while paying no heed to him even though he was right in front of them.

Harold actually wanted to make Liner as strong as himself, but it was unfair to expect that of him. Not to mention his character's original capabilities, Harold's current power also included the techniques and the information that had been accumulated by the game's players.

That advantage was not something that others could catch up to in a day. Afterwards, as the three men were getting riled up over Harold's strength, they were kept in check by Erica, and everyone's attention gathered over Colette.

"I-I am Colette Ameller. I am Liner's childhood friend, and, hmm..."

Colette's line of sight wandered about. It seemed like she was going to look at Harold, but after her glance reached him, it proceeded towards Erica, who was sitting next to him.

Harold understood the meaning of the look she had given him. She did not intend to speak of past events, that was likely the intent she wanted to convey when her eyes met his. She was very bad at keeping secrets and it was obvious that she was hiding something, but even so, Harold could be relieved that she was taking his intentions into consideration.

The problem however was the meaningful glance Colette had directed towards Erica. It did not seem like this was their first meeting. The moment Harold thought that, he heard something that he could not possibly ignore.

"I-I'm also Erica-sama's friend..."

Colette timidly said so. Needless to say that Harold's eyes had turned into dots.

He turned his face towards Erica, who was sitting on his left, while he held down the urge to interrogate her about what was going on. Her facial expression was a mix of awkwardness and resignation.

It was surprising of her to display such a face, but it showed that, for some reason, Erica was not pleased by Colette's words.

However, that was not the important part. For Harold, it was already a big problem that Erica and Colette already knew each other from before. When had that happened? Where? Why? He did not have a clue, and the worst of expectations had crossed his mind. Perhaps Erica knew of the past he shared with Colette. But even though Harold had such doubts, he quickly put a stop to that thought, as he assessed that it was overly simplistic.

(There is no way that's true... probably... I think...)

Although he could not confirm this, he believed the current situation would not have come to be if Erica was aware of his past deeds. Also, this was paradoxical logic, but considering her personality, it was safe to think that she was just hiding her hatred of Harold.

Moreover, in view of the look Colette had given Harold earlier, she would probably not expose his secret easily. If he reacted rashly here, that could backfire on him. So he took a small, yet deep breath and regained his calm.

"...Long time no see, Colette-sama."

"Oh, no need to add "sama" to my name! "Colette" alone is just fine!"

"How about Colette-san?"

"Y-yes! Please use that!"

The expression Erica had on her face just seconds before disappeared as if it had never been there, and her usual, fascinating, soft smile returned. The speed of that change was as fast as one would expect from her.

Nevertheless, in proportion to her claim that she was Erica's friend, Colette seemed quite nervous. While this may not have been their first meeting, the fact that they were still worrying over honorifics just went to show that they weren't that close to each other.

With that said, Harold did not understand how they had ended up becoming friends. Their relationship was a mystery.

"Guess I'll go last. I'm Hugo Grafton. I'm an adventurer. As for why I'm with Liner and Colette... Well, things just worked out that way."

"If you're an adventurer, then you are aware of the dangers you'll face if you enter a restricted area, correct?"

"Of course... But well, actually, I can't really claim that I am."

Maybe because he recalled his mistake in the Haibar ruins, Hugo embarrassedly scratched his head. Harold did not overlook the fact that, at that moment, Hugo stole a glance at him.

Perhaps he had already realized that Harold was the robed man from that time. The pending problems waiting for Harold were increasing faster and faster. To top that off, his mind was exhausted, and for some reason, he felt like even his stomach was hurting.

Currently, Harold's only comfort was the tea made by Juno.

"Mhm, I guess you have your reasons. By the way, Harold. "

"...What?"

"Why were you looking for Liner and the others? It seems like you already know them, do you happen know what their situation actually is, too?"

Itsuki's keen insight was surprising in many ways, but in this particular case, most people would likely have figured things out by connecting the dots. The timing of the encounter was too good for it to be an accident, so Itsuki's thoughts were reasonable.

"Yeah, I do know."

Harold intended to disclose all the information he possibly could. From here, he was going to tell them the solution to the miasma problem, to make them assemble as a party like in the original story, and to let them know that Justus Freund was the root of all evil.

He had to do that to get them ready to fight with everything they had in the all-out war that was going to come months from here.

His choice was likely going to affect the flow of the original story in a big way, and Harold was terrified by the fact that he might influence the fate of the whole world.

Still, he stepped forward, convinced that he had to take this step for the sake of surviving.

”And I’ll also show you people the most efficient solution to deal with that later. But say, Itsuki.”

”What is it?”

”About the miasma outbreak in your territory, what would you do if I tell you there is a way to put an end it for good?

Chapter 93

(Harold's pov)

It was only a slight change, but those words had made Itsuki's facial expression stiffen a little. It looked like Erica had her breath taken away, too. The human losses had been held back to a minimum thanks to the antibody drugs made by Harold, and with the LP farming method, the territory had acquired a new source of revenue; but nevertheless, the decay in their exploitation of forestry, which used to be their forte, was still a painful problem for the Sumeragi territory.

Even if their economy had not been affected at all, this was still a source of anxiety, and there was no helping the fact that it was a minus for the whole Sumeragi territory. There was no reason for Itsuki's interest to not be caught by this.

"Can you really do it?... That would probably be a foolish question to ask. But how in the world would you go about doing that?"

That was a reasonable question for Itsuki to ask. But presenting an answer to this would be the same as revealing who was the one pulling the strings behind this case.

In other words, it would clarify that Liner's end goal was to bring down Justus. But what would really happen if Harold told them about the existence of the last boss, which had been revealed to them only by the final stage of the original story?

Harold had been troubled and scared many times so far about changing the flow of the game's story, and as he modified it over and over again, he had started thinking like this: What if the story had already reached a point from which it could not be fixed anymore?

In this world, Clara had survived, and with that, Colette had no reason to hate Harold. The same applied to Liner, who was hostile to Harold in the original story because he was his childhood friend's enemy.

Due to the antibody drugs and the LP farming method, the Sumeragi territory had not fallen into a serious economic crisis, and they no longer needed to marry their daughter Erica to the infamous Harold.

Since he hadn't lost his subordinates, Cody did not give up on the knight order and still belonged to it, therefore, the Frieri group, which was supposed to be established by him, was instead managed by Harold with Elu's support.

Harold had also unexpectedly developed a connection with some of the members of the protagonist's party who were supposed to have nothing to do with his character until the start of the game, such as Lifa, Francis and Hugo. The Harold Stokes in this world had already become a completely different person from the original Harold stokes, and in this situation where he was close to the eleventh hour, he probably had better make his plans accordingly. Therefore he spoke up without hesitation.

"This is the source of the miasma. You'll be able to stop it if you disable it."

As he said so, he took out a hexagon-shaped machine of about ten centimeters (4 inches) in diameter. It was a strange-looking object with a cord and a blinking light on it. When Harold put it on the desk, it made a heavy, solid thud.

While in the middle of a mission to set some of these devices in specific places, Harold figured it might be useful and took one of them for himself. Because he was afraid that Justus would find out, Harold had insisted that he had lost the device and continued asserting his innocence until he stopped being questioned about it. So, in short, he had stolen it.

"What kind of machine is this?"

"Do you know about what they call a dragon pulse?"

"I recall it's like a passage through which the earth's essence flows..."

Itsuki answered Harold's question with some vague information. However, if he already knew that much, then there was no problem. A dragon pulse was something like a power spot.

Incidentally, Colette and Liner, who were facing Harold, exchanged glances and tilted their heads in wonder, seemingly unaware of what a dragon pulse was.

"That's right. And by installing this mechanism in the dragon rear, which is the

exit of a dragon pulse, one can absorb the earth's essence, its energy."

Harold wasn't quite sure how the device worked exactly, but a normal person simply could not understand an object that was made by Justus himself. For the time being, he could do nothing but acknowledge the fact that that was how things were.

Besides, this world's mysterious energy that was called the earth's essence was even more familiar to Harold than the energy that people used in his original world, so he didn't even have to twist the truth.

"So what? I don't really get it."

"The earth's essence is like a person's blood. Liner, what would happen if, for instance, you were to tie a rope very tightly around your upper arm?"

"My blood would stop!"

"Yeah. Then, if your blood stopped circulating there, it would result in necrosis, and your arm would rot and fall down."

Those words made the whole room silent. Almost everyone had guessed the meaning behind Harold's words.

To clarify the seriousness of the situation even further, Harold continued explaining.

"When the flowing essence gets interrupted at the dragon rear, a similar phenomenon happens to the earth. The miasma is like blood that's gone bad; it's the essence's impurities."

"The essence's impurities..."

"When they enter someone's body in large quantities, the impurities get mixed up with the person's blood, causing an anomaly."

That was the setting in the original story. Moreover, considering the fact that the antibody drug was effective in this world, then this theory probably applied here as well.

Harold had thought that Itsuki would be delighted to find the solution to a problem he had been facing for years, but that was not the case. Rather, his facial expression looked even grimmer than before.

"...Harold, is there a way to cure someone whose blood was mixed up with those impurities?"

"Yes, and it's quite simple. If you disable the machine, then the earth's held back essence will start overflowing. If that someone breaths that in, then his condition will probably improve."

"Really?!"

Itsuki became excited and showed a broad smile, it was a complete change from his earlier grim face. He was concerned about the lives of his people above all else, that was his top priority, just as one would expect from someone who was from the Sumeragi family. Erica, who was next to Harold, kept on taking deep breaths to calm herself down.

When the device was deactivated in the original story, the accumulated earth essence gushed out, and some light green particles rained down on the Sumeragi territory. The game also showed a depiction of patients, who had been affected by the miasma, suddenly recovering upon inhaling those particles.

Justus intended to make use of that accumulated essence, therefore if the devices that were installed in various places, including the Sumeragi territory, were disrupted, his plans would be put to action with an insufficient amount of energy, and he would get incomplete results. In other words, properly solving the miasma problem here would show effect in the fight against the last boss.

"If you deactivate the device that's installed at the dragon rear somewhere on the mountain, then the flow at the dragon pulse will return to normal and the miasma will disappear. The local population will be saved, as well. You hear me? Don't destroy it, deactivate it."

"We'll do that for sure. But what happens if we break it?"

"The enormous flow of essence that's been held back will go on a rampage and will blow up the whole area."

"That's one serious task to take on!!"

Francis showed an exaggerated reaction, but everyone else shared the same stiff expressions on their faces.

Well, perhaps that was an inevitable reaction given that they were told the

whole area would blow up if they failed.

"Stop shouting. It's going to be fine as long as the right procedure is used to deactivate it."

"O-oh. Don't scare us like that..."

"And Harold-sama knows that procedure for sure!"

"No, I don't."

Liner, who had been feeling relieved, and Colette, whose eyes had been full of expectations, were both frozen stiff on the spot. The atmosphere instantly became heavy.

"You don't...? Then, what should we do? Should we ask the one who made the machine?"

"How dumb can you possibly be? We can't exactly ask the one responsible for this situation to deactivate the device for us now, can we?"

"That, that makes sense..."

Harold unintentionally insulted Hugo out of reflex. As for Hugo's reaction, he shrank back.

Harold had reflexively let his mouth speak even though he had been trying to avoid talking more than necessary. But well, so far, he hadn't stopped talking at all, so his hopes of keeping his identity concealed were steadily going down.

"Then we'll have to look for a solution from scratch. First we'll examine the structure of that device and..."

"That won't be necessary."

"...What do you mean?"

Harold took the machine he had put on the desk and he lightly tossed it on his right, towards Lifa who caught it with both of her hands.

"She'll disable it."

"Her?"

"Yeah, that's right. You got a problem with that?"

With a slightly provocative tone to her voice, Lifa smiled at Itsuki. Needless to say that what she meant was that he shouldn't judge by appearances and make light of her just because she was small.

In the game's story, Lifa could manipulate a machine's system right after touching it for the very first time; she was also familiar with mechanical engineering and electronic engineering given that there were scenes where she quickly built some simple machines of her own. So, although she was overshadowed by Justus because he was simply too much of an oddity, she was still a genius.

Harold had handed her the device on the way here and had gotten her to grasp its structure and the method to deactivate it. She herself had said "I'll do it", so everything was likely going to be fine.

"That's how it is. As soon as Lifa is done getting prepared, we'll go disable the device."

"I'll go with you!"

"M-me too...!"

"If you two are going, then I guess I'll have to come along."

Liner, Colette and Hugo immediately showed their will to accompany Harold and Lifa; and Francis followed suit.

"Well, now that I've heard so much, It's impossible for me to withdraw."

"Franck..."

"My royal blood would cry if I didn't take action to pull my best friend out of his predicament."

"...Thank you. Alright, then I'll also——"

"No." "You cannot."

Harold and Erica simulataneously interrupted the words of Itsuki who was about to declare that he would participate.

That was only natural. Not to mention the fact that Itsuki had not appeared in this event in the original story, he was also the next head of the Sumeragi family. He could not afford to take the risk of losing his life in the unlikely case

of a failure.

It was probably the same thought process that led Erica to stop her brother.

"No? But...."

"Think about your standpoint. "

"Shouldn't you take shelter in case of an emergency, elder brother?"

"The people of the Sumeragi family can't not involve themselves with this serious matter."

"Then, I'll go. You don't mind, right? Harold-sama."

"Don't ask me. Decide that for yourself."

"You heard him. Please restrain yourself, elder brother."

The conversation continued as Harold and Erica kept firing one argument after another towards Itsuki before he could utter any objection. Although Erica and Harold's affinity was supposed to be bad, when their intents matched, they worked surprisingly well together.

When thinking about it calmly, it wouldn't be good for Erica to come along in such an expedition, but although Harold believed that, he still felt it would be quite convenient if she did come.

Afterwards, Harold, Erica and Itsuki kept arguing with each other, but by the end of the two-to-one battle, Itsuki was the one who finally gave in.

However, once it had been decided who would be going to deactivate the device, Francis suddenly asked a question.

"By the way, Harold. Where did you get that device and the method to solve the miasma problem?"

As Harold expected, he was going to have to answer to that question. Everyone's eyes naturally gathered on him.

Believing that this was a good timing to lay out the truth anyway, he spoke up.

"Because I'm familiar with the one responsible for what this device did."

"What?"

"Justus Freund. He was the one pulling the strings behind the miasma outbreak."

"What?! Wasn't Dr. Freund the one who protected you?!"

"On the surface, yeah. Fact is that he was just taking his chance to put me under his control and use me."

"...Can you explain the situation?"

"Humph. If you want to know that badly, then I'll tell you."

Now then, where should I start? Harold pondered. If I'm going to start from the beginning, then I guess I should talk about that thing first.



(Erica's Pov)

Erica was sweating badly. The reason for that was that both Harold and Colette were present right in front of her.

There would have been no problem if only one or the other was here. She would have been happy to unexpectedly meet Colette once again, and a sudden visit from Harold would make her heart leap from joy, although she would not show that on her face.

However, since both of those events happened at the same time, she couldn't be all that delighted.

Her relation to Harold had been lasting for eight whole years during which it was solidified through lies and misunderstandings.

Harold had lied to Erica and had wrongly guessed that she believed he had killed Colette and her mother.

Although she knew that Harold was lying, Erica was pretending to be deceived by him out of respect for his intentions.

Also, Colette was aiming directly at the lies which were making Harold and Erica's relation look bad on the surface, because she did not understand the delicate nature of their connection.

Erica believed she was the one who understood the situation better than anyone else. Therefore, she could not act rashly. There were some secrets that simply needed to be kept between each of the three parties, and this situation was basically a three-way deadlock.

Thus, she was reluctant to expose the fact that Colette was her friend.

Colette had done nothing wrong. Erica was the one who had suggested that the two of them should become friends once they met again, and she was actually glad that Colette still remembered that promise from five years prior. However, why did that have to happen with this timing?

Erica couldn't deny Colette's words, so she properly acknowledged her as her friend. It was impossible for her to make herself cold-hearted enough to feign ignorance in these circumstances.

She was feeling a completely new type of pain in her stomach. Her mind and her body did not seem like they would last for long this time around.

However, as the discussion went forward, there was less and less room to worry about these matters.

She was abruptly informed of the method to cure the patients who were affected by the miasma, and to even solve the miasma problem entirely. The Sumeragi family had been seeking that information with open arms.

More importantly, Harold was going to personally talk about his past. Though, knowing Harold, it was unlikely for him to confess the entire truth, she still wanted to know what he was thinking, even if only a little.

"First of all, do you recall the Beltis forest battle from five years ago?"

Harold began talking disinterestedly. For Erica, that battle was where it all began; she could not possibly forget it.

"That was a conflict where the imperial army launched an assault due to which both the knight order and the stellar tribe suffered many casualties. If I remember right, that was when you were suspected of being a spy of the Empire."

Francis was the one who answered.

It seemed like he knew the outline of the story since it had made quite a stir at the time. However, that information was just made to manipulate the public opinion.

"That's not correct. Harold had gotten information about the Imperial army's invasion before it happened, and he went to the Beltis forest to prevent that from happening."

"That doesn't matter."

"Yes, it does. You got that serious injury because of that."

"It was just a scratch."

"An air hole was opened through your shoulder with a magic spell, the wound was so severe that you stayed unconscious for a week, so I wouldn't call it a scratch."

"W-were you all right in the end...?" (*Colette*)

"I'm here right now so of course I was all right. I'll continue my story now. "

Itsuki knew that Harold would get irritated when too much information about him was exposed.

But ever since that injury had happened, part of Itsuki was desperate to do everything to stop Harold from being reckless and acting rashly. He had tasted the same fear as Erica when Harold's life was put on the line due to that battle. Thereafter, he became willing to act cranky so as to dissuade Harold from being careless. However, that was unfortunately not very effective.

"In that battle, I defeated a major general of the imperial army, and I put in some great efforts to capture him. As a result of that, I was arrested under suspicions of being a spy of the imperial army. Two weeks later, it had been decided that I would be executed."

"That's ridiculous! You were the one who stopped the battle!" (*Liner*)

Indeed, the work that Harold displayed in that battle was well worthy of praise, it would not have been strange for him to get a medal for that. If not for Harold, that battle might have grown into an internal strife between the knight order and the stellar tribe due to the imperial army's schemes.

He had been dressed with the imperial army's uniform so as to notify the knight order early on about who the real enemy was, but even if that fact had been kept hidden to bring him down, it would still have been impossible to punish him.

But even so, it did happen, and Harold was finally going to tell the truth about that.

"The one who drove the Sarian Empire into launching an attack was a man named Harrison, but he was actually being manipulated by Justus."

"..... In short, he's the one who's truly responsible for that battle...."

Erica's voice was slightly trembling out of shock and anger.
On the other hand, Harold kept speaking emotionlessly.

"Yeah, that's right. In addition, Justus manipulated the people of the tribunal so that they would sentence me to execution, and once I was incarcerated in a dungeon, he judged that the time was ripe and appeared before me. Then he told me that sitting there waiting for my death was no good and he asked me to come with him."

What a crafty threat, thought Erica. He was the one who cornered him into that predicament and yet he was also the one who offered him his help. That was the epitome of viciousness.

Looking at Itsuki and Liner, they seemed to be getting angry at Justus, as for Colette and Hugo; they looked like they were feeling compassionate towards Harold who had been treated too unfairly.

"Although it was annoying to work with him, it was a good opportunity to find out his real intentions. One of the things I learned in that process was the information I just gave you."

"...But why is Dr.Freund doing such things?"

"It seems like he's planning something that requires him to capture the upper echelons of the country. Both the Beltis forest's battle and the energy he's absorbing from the dragon pulse are probably related to that as well. I don't want to try to guess the real intentions of a man who's so mad that he captured people from the stellar tribe to practice human experimentation."

"Human experimentation? Don't tell me he caused that whole battle for that!?"

"The chaos gave him the perfect occasion to kidnap people."

"Shit! Harold, are the people he kidnapped safe?!"

"...He only managed to take two people away. But I wouldn't say they're safe."

"Damn it!"

Francis punched the desk as his facial expression became distorted. If he did not do that, he likely would have been at a loss about where to let out his anger.

Hugo also murmured something, saying only “Don’t tell me they were...”, but he then closed his mouth. Judging from his words, he might have thought of something at that moment.

A mournful atmosphere dominated over the room. Even Juno, who had been casting her eyes down while sitting on a chair in a corner, tightly grasped her hands on her knees. The only one whose mood did not change was Harold.

“And then, there is you, Liner.”

“Y-yes”

“Harrison was the one who ordered the theft of that sword of yours. And, naturally, Justus was behind that, too.”

“What the hell.... Then, the reason you almost died, the reason mom and dad got hurt, the reason those innocent people were injured, the reason the Sumeragis’ people suffered, the reason for everything that happened were Justus’ actions?!”

“As far as I know, yes.”

“He’s gonna pay! I’m gonna beat the hell out of him!”

Liner spoke up in high spirits. That feeling was also shared by Erica, and perhaps by everyone in the room.

When examined carefully, the sources of their anger were probably more or less different from one individual to another. However, there was one thing they all shared in common: it was the blaze of anger they lit up against Justus for daring to hurt Harold so much. This was the first time Erica ever felt emotions that were this negative.

“If you think you can do it, go ahead and try. But that’s not gonna happen unless you fix the miasma problem first.”

Everyone’s voices got mixed up as they replied in a disorderly fashion with “yes”, “Of course!”, “let’s go” and more, but every one of their answers was a strong, affirmative response.

No need to say that Erica's voice was included in that as well.

Chapter 94

It was questionable whether Harold had made it through the crisis or not, but at least he had managed to finish the discussion in the living room without revealing the things he wanted to keep hidden. He could tell from looking at Colette that she likely would not speak about the secret they shared, so as long as he kept his eyes on Liner, no troublesome situation would arise. On top of that, he had induced the original story's hero party to go solve the miasma problem, so perhaps it was fine to say that this event had actually gone well.

He was still wrecking his brains about which direction to take with his plans in the future, but at least things would go favorably well until "that scene". What "that scene" referred to was, in short, the event where Harold would antagonize Liner and the others.

In that event, the group had entered the enormous flying fortress made by Justus and were very close to catching up to him, but someone suddenly appeared in their way, and it was no other than Harold Stokes. He had been deluded by Justus' flattery and strengthened by the astral potion, so beating him was one of the greatest challenges that the hero's party faced on their journey. Then, once they defeated Harold, they failed to catch Justus, and the scene moved to their final fight, but Harold was troubled about how to deal with that battle, as well.

As for whether there was a way to avoid this by finding someone fit to be Harold's substitute in his fight against Liner and the others, the answer was no. There was only a number of months left, in that short of a time frame, there was no way to find someone capable enough to take care of the hero's party in the last stage of the story.

Even if he still got through that event without using a substitute, then what would happen? Harold could not tell at all.

All he actually had to do was to defeat Justus before he would get to run away and then everyone would live happily ever after, but it was hard to believe that

that man did not have some means to defend himself. He most certainly had some countermeasures prepared for that.

Or rather, in the last fight, Justus had made use of the energy at the start to fight, so it would be troublesome if he was cornered and ended up releasing his power in a different setting from the original story. Clashing directly against him would probably just raise the possibility of losing.

Moreover, aside from Harold not wanting to change the overall progress of the events, his chances of success would rise for sure if he fought in the actual final scene which he was already familiar with and prepared for. Therefore, at this point, he wanted to do his very best to not alter the flow of the story.

Thus...

(As I thought, I suppose I'm gonna have to do it...)

Harold had considered the method of becoming a member of the hero's party so as to manage the actions of Liner and the others, however, he couldn't help but conclude that it would be too difficult to control them. Plus, his dangerous relationship with Erica would not have a good influence, and even if he resolved the misunderstandings he had with her, the ill feelings she had towards him would probably not disappear all that simply.

In the first place, Harold did not even know whether Justus' actions would be the same as they were in the original story or not, but he was afraid that it would be meaningless to think about that too much. Because if Justus' actions really were to change, then all hope would be lost.

As Harold indulged in those speculations, his thoughts were forcefully interrupted.

"Amazing!"

"I've never seen a bath this huge!"

"It seems to be called an onsen, an outdoor, hot spring bath. Their culture is quite unfamiliar to me but this is splendid."

It was no exaggeration to say that what Harold valued the most in the Sumeragi residence was their outdoor bath. After he had separated from the others, he went to take a break in a room and then decided to refresh himself in the outdoor bath since he had been unable to do that for a long time, but the

general atmosphere vanished when three people's voices suddenly barged in. The trio that appeared was composed of Liner, Hugo, and Francis. They also noticed Harold, who had entered the bath before them.

"Oh, Harold."(Francis)

"You came here, too?"(Liner)

Two of them very naturally dived into the bath from both sides of Harold, splashing the very hot water and coming into direct contact with it. The two then jumped up while screaming "It's hot!", and in response to their loud complaint, Harold glared at them as if asking "What the hell are you doing?".

"Don't soak your filthy bodies inside, you idiots. You can come once you've fully washed yourselves."

"Y-yes!"

"Sorry about that!"

As they were pressured into doing so, Liner and Francis escaped towards the washing place. Washing one's body before entering the bath was not really established as good mannerism, but Harold, who had turned into the outdoor baths' magistrate, was quite particular about that. Passing by the two others who were going away, Hugo, who had washed the dirt and sweat on him, entered the hot spring bath.

"... Say, hmm, Harold, was it?"

Hugo and Harold had been lined up while soaking in the bath, and after a brief period of silence, Hugo had started talking.

"What do you want?"

"Well, recently, I met someone who was quite similar to you. I didn't see his face but he had the same voice and tone as you."

It seemed like Hugo somehow was already having suspicions. Well, that was only natural.

Harold had kept both his face and name hidden from him, but besides that, he had taken no other measures to hide his identity. That was because both of

their encounters had come at an unexpected timing.

"...And, what about that?"

"Well, I don't have any problem with it, and I'm not thinking of telling anyone either. It's just that, there were two other people accompanying that man as his partners. For some reason, I've been wondering whether they're all right. Well, that's probably all nonsense though."

"I don't know anything about whatever you're talking about, nor about those two people... But I'll just say that you don't need to worry about that."

"Oh, is that so? Then, it's all good."

Although the thought process behind his choice was not clear, Hugo seemed like he was not going to tell others about the matter in the Haibar ruins. He seemed to be concerned about Lilium and Ventus, whose inability to communicate had slipped from Harold's mouth before.

Hugo might have become aware of who they were in the earlier discussion when two people of the stellar tribe, who were taken for human experiments, were mentioned. Perhaps he had connected what Harold had said about them not being safe with the fact that they could not communicate.

"Then, now that my head's all cleared, let's go peep at the women's bath!"

The serious atmosphere radically changed as Hugo abruptly said these words while standing up, but he then fell down when his back was mercilessly kicked by Harold. A big column of hot water rose up as Hugo fell forward and sank in the bath.

Starting from there, the onsen became very noisy. Liner and Hugo were splashing water at each other, and they captured Francis to then push him into the hot spring. As he shouted "Hot! Way too hot!", his appearance looked quite appropriate for a young man his age.

It felt like they were making friends with each other way too fast, but considering the future ahead, that was a good thing. However, since they were being unbearably noisy, Harold stealthily escaped while the three of them were getting into high spirits because of their first time in an onsen.

I'll go change to a yukata and hurry back to my room. As Harold thought that, he left towards the corridor, and there, he suddenly encountered Lifa.

When she saw Harold, there was a look of shock on her face.

"Hey, what the hell are the guys doing? They're being so noisy, I don't even feel like taking a bath anymore."

Apparently, the three men were so noisy as they played around that they could be heard all the way to the women's bath. However, even though Lifa told him about that, there was not much Harold could do to help.

"What a coincidence. I had the same problem."

Or rather, the place had been exceedingly noisy to him since the noises of the splashing water and of the quarreling voices had arisen in his direct presence, as he had witnessed the playful scene with his own eyes.

"...Oh, I see what's going on."

Lifa immediately understood Harold's situation and breathed a sigh. She had been about to go to her room before so she continued walking down the corridor by Harold's side. While on the way, she spoke up in a displeased manner, having seemingly recalled something.

"Oh right, Harold, by the way, you should tell me about those kinds of things from the get go next time."

"What are you talking about?"

"You showed me that machine on the way to the Sumeragi territory and all you said was "Look for a way to deactivate this", I didn't think it was such an important matter."

"No matter how I went about it, it wouldn't have changed anything from what you had to do. So it's irrelevant."

"Like hell it is!"

Although Lifa was getting angry, at Harold, he actually had his reasons for what he did.

First of all, as a prerequisite for what the team was going to do next, Lifa had to deactivate that device; otherwise, it would have been all over. In the original story, the group had entered the mountain in the name of investigating the cause of the miasma outbreak, by the end of the search, they finally found the

device and Lifa deactivated it.

It was not possible to assess whether that was really easy for Lifa, or whether that scene was just portrayed like in the story only because it was convenient for the game. Therefore, Harold had Lifa analyze the device beforehand, at a time when her thoughts were not yet occupied with extra factors. Such as looking for Liner and the others, and searching for solutions to the miasma problem. That especially applied to the latter, for it would have put some great stress on her.

Harold was not sure if it was because of what he did, but it seemed like, as a result, Lifa's response turned out to be splendid. She had given a powerful, confident answer, ascertaining that she could disable the device without a problem.

"Seriously, you're so self-centered."

"Sure, like you're one to talk."

After all, Lifa was the one who had forcefully accompanied Harold with no regards to what he had to say about that.

"....And yet, even though you're so selfish, you still worry about her."

Lifa suddenly muttered that.

"What are you on about?"

"I'm talking about Erica. You insisted that she's not your fiancée, but her elder brother seems to think otherwise."

"He's just making that claim of his own accord."

"But how does Erica dissatisfy you? She's beautiful, she's graceful, and just earlier, she was considerably cordial towards Colette and me even though we're not nobles. And her personality is good, too, right?"

""

Harold could not find anything to answer back on the spot. It wasn't like he disliked Erica, he was just keeping her away because he was too afraid to cause any death flags to come to him.

Save for that, he had no dissatisfaction or complaints regarding Erica as a

member of the opposite sex. She was at a level where one would have to wonder: Was there really a straight man in the world who could complain about a girl of her caliber? Also, of course, she was the most popular character among the players, as well.

As he thought about such things, Harold stayed silent.

"I guess this has nothing to do with me and I'm just poking my nose where it doesn't belong, but what I mean is that your attitude towards Erica doesn't seem like yourself."

"It doesn't seem like myself, you say?"

"That's right. You only say cynical and harsh things, but you're also kind of intolerant of the people who still get close to you with no regards to your attitude. I think I'm a pretty good example since you went as far as kidnapping me to tell me to go home, but still, in the end, here I am."

"That's because you're darn persistent."

"That just might be the case, but then, why are you actively trying to keep Erica away? She's not trying to get closer to you."

It was impossible for Harold to answer. Because in order to explain that, he would have to explain that this world resembled a game he used to play, or that he knew the future, which would make him seem insane.

"You say that her elder brother is the only one who still keeps talking about her being your fiancée, and that you both don't care about each other. However, if that was the truth, then I think you wouldn't need to keep "only" Erica away from yourself like that."

Nobody up to now, not even Harold himself, had perceived this incongruity that could not really be called an inconsistency. Yet Lifa had accurately seen through it.

Perhaps her keen perception and her ability to think things through like that was what made her a genius.

"In a certain sense, you're quite impartial. You say harsh things to everyone, no matter whom, and you have no interest in who gets driven away by that. That was how you behaved with the Laboratory's people."

Lifa kept talking to Harold who was still unable to say anything back.

"But since you only feel indifference towards them, you're actually pushing Erica away even further away than them. Because with Erica, you're not harsh like you usually are with others. You're cold towards her. As if there was something you were afraid of."

That was mostly correct. Harold was afraid of raising death flags because of Erica. Perhaps that feeling had infected his behavior and Lifa had perceived that as him being cold.

"Me, Afraid? What, are you Stupid?"

"...Well, I'm kind of just throwing accusations right now. My bad, forget about it."

"See you later", after saying that, without looking at Harold's face, Lifa disappeared behind a corner in the direction of her room.

She had told Harold to forget, but for some reason, the words she had left him with were like wedged into his chest, and he was not going to be able to forget them easily.

Chapter 95

(Harold's Pov)

The next day, Harold was quite in a hurry to solve the miasma problem, so he decided to go explore the mountain with Liner and the others from early in the morning. While Lifa was all done with her preparations, one of the main reasons Harold chose to depart so early was that he did not know what kind of flags he would trigger if he overstayed his welcome in the Sumeragi family's residence.

Harold took the vanguard position to depart towards the restricted area, while looking with cold eyes at Itsuki, who was getting excessively worried for him and Erica, like a mother finding herself unable to let her son go to take a train for the capital. However, before leaving, there were some things Harold wanted to say.

"Why the hell are you here?"

"Because I am Erica-sama's attendant."

Juno was present among the group. That was not strange considering her position and her capabilities, but she was still wearing her cooking apron, same as usual. Her outfit was probably not going to be suitable to push her way forward between the mountain's recesses.

That could be said to apply to every female member in the team, as Erica was wearing a kimono, Lifa was wearing a miniskirt and Colette's exposed clothes looked like they came from a southern country. Every one of them was wearing the exact same clothes as they did in the game.

But Harold forcefully convinced himself not to bother with these kinds of things anymore.

Rather than that, it was more useful to once again confirm the actions and the precautions the team was going to take in the restricted area.

"...Whatever. Now, all of you bastards, take this."

"What is this?"

"It's the medicine that alleviates the effects of the miasma. Drink it before entering the restricted area."

Harold gave each member some of the antibody drugs that were stocked in the Sumeragi family's reserves. He had brought some more of it, so there probably wouldn't be much of a problem even in the unlikely scenario where the expedition would last longer than expected.

But did that mean that the miasma wasn't a problem as long as that drug existed? Well, that matter was not so simple. No matter the amount of drugs available, the more someone consumed it, the less effective it would become. It seemed like there were no signs of damage on a person's health from inhaling the miasma after taking the drug for the first or second time, but the risks would naturally increase if they had more occasions to inhale it. So at the end of the day, this meant that the Sumeragi territory's forests would be useless as long as they weren't free of the miasma.

This information had been obtained by the Sumeragi family through their multiple investigations aimed at somehow finding a solution to the miasma problem. Moreover, it was a fact that was not depicted in the game where all that had to be done was to make the medicine and drink it so as to clear an event.

"But, like I warned you yesterday, this doesn't mean that you'll be alright if you inhale the miasma for too long. So we'll finish quickly before the medicine stops being effective."

"I can do that. But the forest where the miasma's spreading is pretty wide, isn't it?"

"I already have a rough idea of where the target is."

"...Damn, you sure do know a lot..."

Although Hugo was looking at him like he was an alien, Harold had simply obtained this information from the original story. He had confirmed in advance that there was a place on the territory's map that overlapped with one of the original work's dungeon maps, so he decided to aim for that location first. Of course, there were some places where this world's maps were completely different from the game's maps because they were on completely different

scales, but Harold's method was still likely to be more efficient than taking a shot in the dark and searching around with no clues.

But well, perhaps Harold's knowledge about the original story seemed uncanny to Hugo and the others, who would not be able to even imagine that this world closely resembled a game which Harold played in the past.

That being said, given the circumstances, this was no time to hold his personality back, so Harold had no choice but to take on a defiant attitude.

"Of course I do. Who the hell do you think I am?"

"It's pretty frightening that I actually think you're making a good point."

"That aside, Liner."

"Mhm?"

"You better still recall real well what I told you yesterday."

"Hmm, hmmm.... The miasma is dangerous, so it would be no good if we breath it in too much, and since the monsters are in a frenzy, we should be careful of that... is that it?"

"You get 30 points on a 100. "

Harold completely discarded Liner's answer. What Liner had spoken of was just the premise of the talk from the day before, where he had been told about the best ways to avoid the dangers he had just mentioned, but it seemed like that part had not really taken root in his memory. The foolish ways he had as a child were still going strong.

This was the actual plan that Harold had told everyone about in the previous night: "For now, we've got to emphasize on speed. I want to shorten our stay in the restricted area as much as possible so that we won't inhale too much of the miasma. For that purpose, we must ascertain the location of the device without losing our way, and you must not fight any more than necessary.

If you do fight, you'll need more oxygen than usual, so you'll end up breathing more. What's more, the miasma has a bad influence on monsters and pushes them into a frenzied state. Therefore, you have to avoid combat no matter what, except if you have no other options.

Hence why you must exercise maximum caution when looking for monsters, and you have to sharpen your senses to always stay aware of your

surroundings.”

That was what Harold had said, and in reality, Liner probably remembered all of that somehow and was just having a hard time rearranging the information in his head and putting it into words.

“You’re a wild pig. If anything happens, you’ll rush ahead without even looking at your surroundings, and there is a risk you’ll disturb the whole front line in the process.”

“Uuh-....”

Liner seemed like he was at a loss for words, which was probably because he was self-aware enough to realize that Harold had hit the bull’s-eye. Well, on top of those flaws of his, Liner was also stupidly direct due to his sense of justice, but that trait of character could be said to be fitting of a hero. His straight-forwardness was surely going to become a force to pull his companions forward in the future.

However, this time, the whole matter would quickly and smoothly be resolved as long as Harold could get Liner to follow his instructions properly, so he gave him a warning.

“If you encounter a monster, your priority will be to shake it off, not to recklessly fight it. You got that?”

“Yes!”

While the answer itself was affirmative, whether Liner would actually follow the order or not was a whole other story.

On the side, Colette let out a large sigh, it seemed like she was also well aware of Liner’s personality.

Well, Harold didn’t think there was any real danger since the team was stronger than it had been in the original story, nevertheless, it was probably better to be careful anyway. The group kept walking ahead for a little while until they arrived at the mountain, where entry had been prohibited for several years. There was a fence and a signboard that were set up there just in case, but it was a sorry excuse for a barrier. Anyone who wanted to enter could enter.

However, that couldn’t be helped since the surface that was occupied by the miasma was too wide to be entirely enclosed. On the other hand, it seemed like

the defenses around the residential areas had been strengthened so as to prepare against the threats of monster attacks and the like.

"You've all taken the medicine?"

Everyone nodded to Harold's question.

Having confirmed that, Harold stepped towards the mountain.

The mountain's entrance looked like an ordinary forest, it was not yet polluted by the miasma. However, for some reason, it was ominously quiet. The only setting that had come up in the original story was that the miasma made the monsters violent, but given the bad effect it had on the human body, then the bodies of the monsters, who were also living creatures, were likely not unaffected by it either. So, in addition to pushing them into a frenzy, perhaps the miasma also shortened their lives.

That would explain the silence. If this was really the truth, then it was a pretty frightening one.

As he advanced for some time while keeping an eye on the map, Harold soon reached a place that was covered in some sort of light purple haze.

"So this is the miasma..."

"This amount should have little to no effect. But if your body feels heavy or numb, report it immediately."

"What should we do in that situation?"

"We'll use some first-aid treatment, however, healing magic would also be effective."

Harold had already explained before that since Juno and Erica were there, then for the time being, the group would have no problems getting access to healing magic.

When he thought about it, it was possible that Juno had been dispatched with the group precisely for that reason, and since she was Erica's attendant to begin with, sending her was like killing two birds with one stone.

Although advancing through this haze did not feel all that great, the efficiency of both the antibody medicine and the healing magic had already been proven in the past, so Harold had no other choice than to believe everything was going to be all right.

“Let’s get done with this quickly” Thinking that, he stepped forward without any hesitation and pushed his way through the vegetation in front of him, while aiming for the backwoods of the mountain.



(Erica’s Pov)

From behind, she could see Harold in the vanguard position, advancing while cutting his own path forward through the vegetation. Even though the miasma was rapidly growing thicker, his walking speed was not slowing down at all; it seemed like he knew where he was going. He had said that he had a rough idea of where the target was, but coming from him, that basically meant he knew almost certainly where the machine was located.

That was what Erica believed, because his situation was the same as always. Harold knew a lot of things and always kept that knowledge all to himself. It was very unusual for him to borrow other people’s strength like he did this time. Or rather, was he really borrowing their strength? Erica wondered. The miasma’s outbreak was the Sumeragi territory’s problem, and their problem alone. In the past, one could have speculated that Harold had taught the Sumeragi family the process of making the antibody medicine so as to curry their favor. But now, he had officially broken any relations he had with them, so that no longer meant anything.

Besides, while Lifa was apparently indispensable to deactivate the device, Harold by himself would probably have been enough to escort her. He would naturally be able to prepare antibody drugs for himself, and he didn’t really need healing magic users such as Erica and Juno. His personality would not allow him to do anything unnecessary, and it would absolutely not let him do anything useless.

In other words, didn’t that mean that Harold simply wanted the present people to solve the miasma matter together with him? At that moment, Erica couldn’t really tell what that meant, but she could at least tell that there was a reason why Harold had gotten personally involved with this matter.

He was putting himself at risk to help the suffering people in the Sumeragi territory, and yet Erica could barely offer any help, that reality wrenched her heart.

She had put in some great efforts, wanting to become Harold's strength and to support him.

However, each time she met him, she was once more made to realize the full extent of the distance that separated her from him. Could she ever catch up to Harold no matter how many times she tried to break free from this cycle? Erica had discouragingly worried about that many times within the privacy of her own head.

(Does Harold-sama actually need me for... anything?)

She was too afraid to even think about that question. Because if she ever made the mistake of dwelling on that, she would end up entwining herself in gloomy, retrospective thoughts, which would stop her from going forward; And that would make it completely impossible for her to ever catch up to Harold.

(That alone I wish to avoid at all costs, hence why I want to always stand firm and do my best, but then why is it so painful to keep going now?)

Erica was realizing that she was weak. She had thought that if she could become Harold's strength, then it did not matter if he never looked back at her. However, that was nothing but a lie, she was just being hypocritical. Whenever he went far off ahead, she wanted him to look back, she wanted him to look at her, and that feeling was growing stronger and stronger all the time. She was afraid that he would go out of her reach, and she was always shouting "Don't leave!" within a corner of her heart.

She showed nothing on the surface, but it was simply too hard for her to hold back the love she felt towards him.

The more she thought of these things, the clearer her own incompetence became to her, and that cut right through her heart.

How could a weak woman like her, who could not even overcome her own weaknesses, ever be fit to be together with Harold —

"Hey."

A seemingly ill-humored voice interrupted Erica's thoughts. She felt her shoulder being lightly jolted, and Harold's face suddenly appeared right before her.

That was so abrupt that Erica found herself unable to do anything other than

blinking her eyes.

"Hey, can't you hear me?"

"...Ah, no, my apologies. I was just thinking about some things...."

As she came to her senses, Erica was taken aback and gave an evasive answer to Harold's question. Before she became aware of it, she had fallen all the way to the back of the group.

It seemed like she had been literally held back by her thoughts.

Harold didn't say anything and just fixedly stared at her face. Which made her think, when was the last time he had looked at her in the eyes like this?

"Do you——"

Although Harold started saying something, he did not get to finish his statement.

Suddenly, he powerfully pulled Erica towards him with his left arm. Then he put his arm around her back, and embraced her.

The moment she realized that, Erica was petrified from confusion and nervousness; she was unable to do anything. Her heart was beating so fast that it felt like it was going to burst. She thought she could hear the sound of her own heartbeat.

Within the confusion, Erica could perfectly feel Harold's warmth. Her face was buried in his chest, and his left arm was around her back, tightly holding her and preventing her from moving. Although she couldn't breathe well, she was still feeling quite comfortable in that position.

(——Wait, what's with me?!)

She was feeling ashamed while her face was turning red from the rude thoughts that she herself was having, such as "if only time could stop at this moment", and the like. She didn't even know why this situation was happening in the first place.

"Tsk, the miasma's become so dense here, I don't even know if there is any meaning to searching for the monsters anymore."

Harold spoke up close to Erica's ear. The miasma certainly did restrict the field of view to an awful extent.

"Sorry, I failed to notice it." (*Francis*)

"Erica-sama, are you alright?" (*Juno*)

Walking up to the two of them were Francis and Juno. Based on their words and behavior, it appeared that a monster had attacked from Erica's back, so Harold had pulled her towards himself and then killed the enemy.

However, Erica could not look behind her to confirm that since she was still being embraced. Moreover, since this was far from being disagreeable, she could not possibly tell Harold that she wanted him to let go of her.

However, that hug did not last for long. Harold soon loosened the strength in his arm and separated himself from Erica.

She barely managed to somehow stop herself from letting a reluctant "Ah!" escape from her mouth. As for Harold, he was once again fixedly staring at her. From that alone, Erica's face was almost boiling up.

"Erica."

"...Yes?"

"Do you understand the situation you're in? This is no time to get lost in your freaking thoughts."

"I am sorry..."

That scolding was only natural. Erica became even sadder as she hadn't even been able to abide by the warnings she had been given beforehand.

She felt like she would break into tears if she let herself go ever so slightly.

"...If you understand then hurry and move already."

From his words, Harold appeared to be annoyed. However, at the same time, he grabbed Erica's wrist and started walking ahead while pulling her by the hand.

"What? H-hmm... Harold-sama?"

"Shut up. Just keep quiet and follow me."

"Y, yes."

He's so cunning, or maybe I'm just being silly? Erica wondered.

Even though she had been thinking of how painful and difficult it was to be by

his side only, with just a few words, he had made her feel like she wanted to follow him anywhere in the world.

Harold probably had not intended to put any deeper meanings behind his words, but he had still filled Erica with energy.

”....He really is cunning.”

As Erica muttered that in a voice so low that nobody else could hear it, she looked down to the ground with tears in her eyes and a wide smile on her face.

Chapter 96

(Harold's Pov)

A little while after entering the mountain, Harold noticed that Erica was feeling awfully down. She was walking slowly and there was a heavy aura coming out of her. Although he did not understand the reason for that, it was too abrupt a change for him not to worry about it, it felt ominous.

Wondering if perhaps she had been affected by the miasma, Harold called out to her. He did not have any reason in particular to do so, but Juno had touched on the matter, saying "What shall we do about this, Harold-sama?" and the others' had facial expressions that seemed to be asking "What should we do?", as well. So, in the end, Harold could not ignore this matter.

Hence why he went to talk to Erica, and while she responded with a somewhat suspicious behavior, it did not feel like there was something wrong with her physical condition. According to her own words, she had just been lost in her thoughts.

But what could she have been thinking about to be surrounded by such a gloomy atmosphere? As he asked himself that question, Harold grew restless.

To make matters worse, Erica was suddenly attacked by a monster so Harold ended up hugging her to protect her. That in itself was a good thing and there shouldn't have been anything wrong with his behavior, but from the perspective of Erica, who utterly despised Harold, this was likely akin to sexual harassment. Harold cursed his fate, he had let his instincts take priority over his reason, and he was now probably going to end up getting slapped for it. However, Erica's response was actually extremely light. Or rather, her mind was lost elsewhere and was not focused on the situation. As Harold expected, this was worrying.

So, he tried asking her "Are you really okay?", but all that came out of his mouth was "This is no time to get lost in your freaking thoughts", after which Erica looked like she was about to cry. At this point, having the bad reputation of a brute or a rascal who made women cry did not really matter to Harold, but

it would still deal quite a bit of damage to his conscience if he really did it. Adding to that, if his predictions were to come true, then after this, Erica was going to play an active role in the mission; and chances were that it would be difficult for her to do her part if she stayed in her current state until then. So, he could have sent her back for the time being, but that was not an option, for Harold did not think it would be a good idea to separate Juno and Erica from the group and to therefore lower the team's power.

So, while resisting the impulse of letting out a humongous sigh, he grabbed Erica by her wrist. Then, he forcibly pulled her with him as he advanced towards his destination.

Considering the miasma's effect, the device had to be deactivated promptly. Hence why Harold couldn't just leave Erica as she was. Fortunately, the place where the machine was likely to be located was already at eye range, all that was left to do was to finish the mission right quick and to then leave, and everything would be just fine.

Moreover, since his mouth would only bring bad consequences whenever he opened it, Harold opted to deal with Erica through actions only, instead of speaking to her. Surprisingly, Erica followed Harold as he held her wrist.

Perhaps she was so dispirited that she didn't have the energy to resist.

Come to think of it, when I was sent to Itsuki's wedding in Kablan half a year ago, the same thing happened, but with our roles reversed. As Harold thought back upon those past events, the team finally arrived at its destination.

There, was a huge pit that was surrounded by the mountain from every direction. Although its shape was distorted, it was still roughly circular, with a gentle slope that went towards the center. Its diameter was in the hundreds of meters, and although Harold couldn't see the whole thing due to the miasma obstructing the view, the pit looked like a giant hole.

Facing that scene, Harold could feel the team's nervousness reaching out from behind him. The cause of their tension was the inside of the pit.

"Wha-What is this...?"

Liner muttered while in blank amazement. His words might have also represented what everyone else was feeling.

In the huge pit, a great variety of monsters were crowded and cramped

together. Since this was the site of the miasma outbreak, it was needless to say that all of those monsters were in a frenzied state. It would have made things easier if those monsters crushed each other, but it didn't seem like such a convenient development was going to occur.

Well, Harold had expected as much.

In the original story, while Lifa was deactivating the device which was located at the center of this same pit, the rest of the team battled against the monsters for ten minutes. In that time, groups of two to five enemies would appear, and once they were defeated, some new similar random group of enemies would come from the edge of the screen, that cycle would last for ten whole minutes and the player had to fight until the time limit is up. Therefore, Harold had expected that there would likely be large numbers of monsters around the machine.

Incidentally, since Francis was not a party member yet by that time, the team was forced to fight with four people only while Lifa was dealing with the machine, and those people were Liner, Colette, Hugo and Erica. Among them, Erica was the only one who could use healing spells and long-ranged attacks, so whenever she was put in a near-death state in the game, the player would be met with an awful development.

This time however, not only Francis was present, but there was also Juno, and above all, Harold himself. So, he wanted to think that the team wouldn't be pushed into a hard fight, but from what he could see, there was a considerable number of monsters. It would probably take several hours to beat all of them. Harold would not know how much time it would take Lifa to deactivate the device until she actually tried, but he still believed it would be better to withdraw immediately right after her success.

"This is where the real thing begins. Everyone, pull out your weapons."

"Hey, Harold, wait. You're thinking of going in there?"

"That's right. Our destination is at the center. That's where the machine is installed."

Harold's excessively brutish strategy was to keep killing the monsters around the center of the pit until Lifa was done. Although this would ordinarily be considered to be reckless, the thing was that this team was not exactly

ordinary.

"I'll create a path through them first, and you'll follow me after that."

Harold pulled out his two swords and turned off his "Switch". He had already readied himself from long before to face off alone against a large group of monsters here. This fight would serve as the perfect practice for him, in case he would be met with the worst-case scenario in later events.

"Don't tell me, you're going to start the attack on your own~?" (*Juno*)

"Well, that would be fine... but, Liner. How about you show me how much you've grown, bastard."

"Oh? Well, you're on! Let's see which one of us can beat the most of them."

"You idiot. This isn't a contest."

However, for now, the most important was that Liner seemed to be eager to attack. Although his reckless personality had been a source of anxiety on the way here, in this situation, that trait of his would shine through.

Since that was the case, Harold could execute his strategy.

"Erica."

"—— Yes."

Her reply was not long by any means, but Harold could still feel Erica's strong and unshakable determination from it. Earlier, she had been so down that she seemed like she was about to cry, but now, there were no traces left of her cloudy expression as she looked at Harold with powerful eyes.

That complete change was a little scary. But well, she seemed to be motivated now so it was probably better not to worry about that.

"Among the spells you can use, which one is the most powerful?"

"Well, 『Meteor Blast』, I guess."

"....."

"Huuuh?!", Harold barely managed to stop himself from shouting that. But he had actually been compelled into reacting that way, because Erica's answer was just that shocking.

Meteor blast was a form of suppressive fire, it was a spell that Erica was supposed to acquire at Level 50. In the game, the blast would take two thirds of the screen. In other words, even if she were pushed back by the monsters, as long as she was able to use the spell, she could bring forth an explosive power that would completely turn the tables at once. Accordingly, it consumed a fitting amount of MP and the incantation took some time as well, but at any rate, Erica was not supposed to know that spell at this point in time.

The MP consumption problem could be solved with a mere “Mana bottle”, which was an MP recovery medicine. So, if Erica joined the hero’s party with her current power, she might ruin the whole Game Balance. The spell was that powerful.

There were plenty of things Harold wanted to ask, such as why did she know that spell and when had she gotten so strong? But he stayed calm and managed to keep those questions to himself.

Right now, Harold did not care about the reasons for this. *“Rather, I should be glad since it’s going to be easier to clear the event”* Thinking that, Harold turned his gaze forward.

“Fire one shot straight towards the center.”

“Certainly.”

Erica focused her concentration and started the incantation. A pale, crimson light came forth and surrounded her.

There was a beautiful yet heavy and coercive feeling to the spell. Which made Harold realize a surprising fact: this was the first time he was seeing Erica use any magic other than healing spells in this world. But that realization was blown off to pieces and swept out of Harold’s mind by Erica’s magic.

“『Meteor blast』”

As Erica said those two words, a rain of meteors fell from the sky. Harold and the others could feel the meteors’ tremendous impact, which was accompanied by a thunderous sound. Several voices of surprise came from the group, the only people who were silent were Erica, who had fire the spell, and Harold who knew what was happening.

But in his heart *“What the hell...”* is what Harold was thinking.

First of all, there was something strange about the attack's power. From here, Harold was able to see that the monsters had been and scattered all over the place. Just where in the world was the original Erica who would feel sorry for killing monsters even if they harmed people? The meteors had formed countless craters in the ground.

Thinking that perhaps this attack would be aimed at himself someday, Harold felt like his spine was about to freeze.

However, just like Harold had ordered her, or rather, even more than expected; she had opened up the path ahead, making it easier to rush forward.

"Let's go, Liner."

"Huh?Ah, yes!"

"Is this already enough? I can still use the spell..."

"...Save your mana."

If that ridiculously powerful spell was used, Harold wouldn't have any chance to measure the capabilities of not only Liner, but also of the other members of the team. But well, now there was no doubt that the monster extermination would go smoothly as the team could leave everything to Erica in the worst case.

There was not much to say about the results that came afterwards. Harold and Liner quickly killed the enemies that still remained on the path ahead, and following behind them while being escorted by the rest of the team, Lifa arrived in front of the device without a hitch. After that, during the 20 minutes that it took to deactivate the machine, the team members kept on killing the monsters determinedly while protecting Lifa.

It seemed like the one who had defeated the most enemies was Erica. Acting as the rearguard, Erica was standing right next to Lifa and had turned into a fixed artillery, she was alternating between her magic and her bow to attack, therefore showcasing clearly her high capacity for both suppression and destruction.

Thanks to that, Harold did not need to do anything unreasonable in particular, so he defeated the monsters indifferently and he had some room to observe the other members' battles.

As for Harold's thoughts on the matter, he assessed that Liner and the others' abilities were not bad at all, and they had been able to advance without being swallowed by the waves of monsters that came at them. At present, he could give a passing mark to their power as individuals and as a team; And they would likely become even better as long as he gave them some pointers afterwards regarding a few concerns that he had.

They were inferior when compared to Erica, but at this point, that couldn't be helped anymore. *Rather, what the hell is going on with Erica's level?* Harold wondered.



(Erica's Pov)

The Sumeragi town regained its energy. That was to be expected, the miasma which had tormented the Sumeragi territory for many years had disappeared, and the people who were stuck in their sickbed because of it had now recovered.

Everything Harold had said had come true. Just how much did the Sumeragi family owe him? How in the world would they be able to return his favors? Harold did not want anything. He did not show interest in getting rewards or fame or anything of the sort. Rather, what he wanted was to break his ties with the Sumeragis. So, the Sumeragi family was in no position to do anything for him, and this was also a difficult problem for Erica as an individual.

Harold had said that the Sumeragis would owe him nothing as long as they cut through the restrictions of the mountain to let Liner and the others pass. So, the family could not display their gratitude to him, all they could do was to praise the group for their success; And when they did so, a dispute occurred. It was within the Sumeragis' residence, one day after the device that caused the miasma outbreak was deactivated. Liner's voice resounded, full of anger.

"I can't agree with this! Why didn't you put Harold's name?!"

"Because I told him it's not necessary."

The information regarding the group's great efforts in solving the miasma problem was spread not only inside the Sumeragi territory, but outside of it as well. However, Harold's name was not included in that.

Needless to say that was because he had refused to be included.

"Why would you do that?!"

"You absolute moron, is there any sign of a brain left in your head? Although I'm not happy about it, I work under Justus. What am I supposed to do if people start talking about how I came in the way of something that is a part of his plans?"

"Then just leave that guy."

"Idiot. I told you before that I have something to do that requires me to keep my position."

Harold and Liner's opinions were like two parallel lines, never meeting with each other. However, in the end, the Sumeragi family would have no other choice than to respect Harold's wishes anyway.

This was his own desire, and considering his standpoint, the Sumeragis had to abide. The Sumeragis' opinion was actually that they should not make any official announcements about the group's accomplishments in order not to make Harold stand out, even though it would be too bad for Liner and the others' efforts not to be recognized. The one who suggested to make the group's accomplishments public anyway was actually Harold himself.

He had asked Liner what he would do after all this, and Liner answered that he would take back his sword and defeat Justus, or something along those lines. Having confirmed that, Harold had then insisted that Liner's work should be made public. That way he would bathe in the people's attention, and then, if he was perceived as a hero, it would make it difficult for the enemy to interfere with him. Yet, on the other hand, it would become easier for Liner and the others to take action.

Although a rise in popularity would be a double-edged sword, if handled well, it could be highly effective.

However, Harold had strictly ordered the Sumeragi family not to include his name in all that, and Liner opposed his decision.... And that was the cause for the current situation.

"But isn't it dangerous to stay around Justus? You don't have to go this far..."

"That's none of your business."

No matter how much Liner kept holding on, Harold showed no signs of accepting his request. That made Liner lose his temper and heat up out of anger.

"It is my business! Last time we met, you saved me, and also, when Colette was — Mmm!"

Liner let out a strange voice. The reason for that was Harold, who was sitting face-to-face with him. He had dexterously thrown a tea-cake right into Liner's wide-opened mouth, therefore forcing him into silence.

Then, Harold quietly stood up and grabbed Liner, who was having trouble chewing the cake, by the nape of the neck.

"That's enough of you. It looks like I'm gonna have to teach your empty head a few things."

"Mmm?!"

Without a care for the struggling Liner, Harold dragged him along with him and took him away somewhere else.

Liner was likely being stopped because he was about to speak of how Harold had saved her in the past. Upon seeing that, Colette had a bitter smile on her face. The same facial expression could be seen on the faces of everyone else who knew about Harold's circumstances, and about the past he wanted to hide.

"Well, leaving those two alone, Colette, after this you guys will continue your journey, right?"

"Yes. It's just like what Liner said."

"If so, is it okay if I accompany you, too?"

Lifa proposed to travel together with Colette's group on their journey.

"Huh? You want to accompany us, Lifa-chan?"

"There is no way I'm letting you go by yourselves."

"I'm glad! I'm looking forward to it!"

With a big smile on her face, Colette took Lifa's hands and then shook them with an enormous force.

Which made Erica realize that Colette was still using honorifics when talking to

her, even though she was open and direct when interacting with Lifa. That was due to Erica's position as a noble, but the sense of distance it created still made her feel a little lonely.

"Mhm, then, I'll come too."

"Oh? Are you sure that's alright? Aren't you part of the royal family?" (*Lifa*)

"That's precisely why I'll come with you. I can't forgive those thieves you're pursuing, but above that, I absolutely cannot forgive Justus for the disorder he's bringing. This man is tormenting the nation's people, as a bearer of royal blood, I have to capture him at all costs."

"...You just rose in my estimation. And here I thought you were just a pretend prince." (*Lifa*)

"You're being real rude here!"

It seemed like Francis had decided to follow Liner and the others from here on out.

But Colette was confused.

"But then, why do you want to come with us, Lifa?"

"I have my reasons. Besides, I've got a small grasp on what that guy's goal might be." (*Lifa*)

"His goal?"

Colette did not seem to understand what that meant, but when Lifa spoke of Harold's goals, Erica felt that something was out of place. The actions Harold had taken this time did not seem like himself. His real intention was likely to gather everyone who was present here together.

Erica, Liner, Colette, Lifa and Francis. Harold had already been acquainted with the five of them from beforehand. The possibility that all five of them would gather in the Sumeragi territory by accident was as likely as an actual miracle. Perhaps even Hugo was included in that.

Therefore, there was no doubt that Harold had caused this situation, and based on the chronology of the events that led to this, Harold had been thinking of making this situation happen for a considerable amount of time. It didn't seem likely that he would elaborate all of this just to solve the miasma matter.

Then, why had Harold gathered them? This was yet another action that did not seem like something he would do.

He had also revealed his past and the danger that Justus represented. Normally, Harold would have hidden that, he would have faced Justus all by himself while talking daringly, and only then he would have made Erica and the others realize how cruel and dangerous of a man Justus really was.

But right now, Harold was trying to obstruct Justus' plan. Probably for that reason, he went to work under him, to get in his way from within the obscurity, all the while aiming for the right moment to rebel against him. Also, if Erica and the others were to hinder Justus' plans from the outside, it would become easier for Harold to take action from the inside.

Obstructing Justus from both the outside and the inside, that was Harold's goal. He was walking a thin line, taking big risks. However, that was likely proportionate to how dangerous Justus' plans were.

Lending her strength to Harold here was likely the only occasion Erica would get to return his favors ever so lightly. She did not know to what extent she would be able to help, but if she could support Harold's goals, even if only a little, then there was no reason to hesitate.

"Colette-san."

"What is it, Erica-san?"

"Would you allow me to come with you, too?"

In response to Erica's words, everyone had a surprised face, except for Lifa. Erica realized that, as she expected, Lifa's thoughts were similar to her own. Perhaps Lifa also wanted to become Harold's strength.

"E-E-Erican-san?! You want to come, too?! Oh god, what should I do...!"

"Erica...."

"Father, brother, please don't stop me. This is what the Sumeragi family... No, this is what I ought to do."

Erica did not avert her gaze, she looked straight in the eyes of her father and brother; and looking like they were beaten by her persistence, each of the two of them let out a small breath.

"This is a request from Erica who seldom ever asks for anything selfish. Let's listen to her, dad."

"...Yes. Even if I try to stop her, she won't. I can see that from her eyes."

"Thank you very much."

Erica deeply bowed her head.

Given her standing as a daughter of the Sumeragi family, her request could be said to be outrageous. However, her father and brother sympathized with her feelings and sent her off, so she was glad; both due to that kindness, and due to their trust, as she felt like they had acknowledged that she had grown up.

"Uh, hmm..... Then, you're coming for real?"

"Yes. I look forward to working alongside you, Colette-san."

"What should we do, Liner?! This is a huge responsibility for us!"

Colette shouted, seeking for the help of Liner, who was not currently there. Around that time, he was likely being trained by Harold. Harold's training was tough on both the mind and the body, and he was as strict on himself as he was on other people.

However, that was Harold's own way of being kind.

Erica loved that awkwardness of his, just like how she loved him, and she had to behave in accordance to that feeling. But right now, she still couldn't convey her feelings to Harold, neither with words nor with actions.

"Lifa-san, I look forward to working with you, too."

"Yeah. Likewise, tomboy lady."

"Hehe, this is the first time I've ever been called that"

As Erica chuckled, Lifa smiled wryly in response.

Erica once again felt that Lifa was just like her, that she couldn't help herself from wanting to become Harold's supporting strength, no matter what. Perhaps she and Lifa were actually rivals.

"I think we're gonna have a hard time on this journey..."

"Well, that can't be helped. He's a selfish man after all."

"He sure is."

As they said so, Erica and Lifa both smiled.

But those smiles had no anxiety to them, they were bright like the blue sky of spring.